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Adverse childhood experiences of sexual offenders against children and adolescents: an analysis of life-trajectory perceptions based on the bioecological theory

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Abstract

Background: Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been reported in research involving sexual offenders against children and adolescents, becoming indispensable for understanding aggressive behaviors later manifested by these individuals. However, few studies address them from an ecological and developmental perspective.
Goals: The present study aimed to understand perceptions regarding the occurrence of ACEs based on the life-history narratives of sexual offenders against children and adolescents.
Methods: A total of 30 interviews were analyzed, conducted with men aged between 27 and 70 years who had been convicted of sexual crimes against children and adolescents in the state of Pará, Brazil. Content analysis was conducted using thematic categories derived from the ACE-IQ instrument. The software IRAMUTEQ was employed to perform correspondence analysis using descending hierarchical classification (DHC).
Results: The results indicated retention of 88.81% of the textual corpus (119 text segments), yielding five classes. These classes revealed that the ACE category "*Sexual abuse*" was perceived as distinct from the others four classes due to its specificity, at times being recognized as abuse and at other times as a sexual relationship. Experiences of bullying and involvement in physical fights were also reported with specific vocabulary, occurring during the transitional phase from childhood to adolescence, in which school and family emerged as weakly interconnected environments. Finally, a correspondence relationship was identified among parental death and substance abuse by family members; neglect and parental separation; and physical abuse and domestic violence. These three content classes were associated with the family context and the difficulties in establishing dyadic relationships with caregivers during participants' development.
Discussion and conclusion: Investigating ACEs based on the principles of the bioecological model of human development enables a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that contribute to the emergence of sexually aggressive behaviors. Such knowledge supports the creation of effective strategies for protection and prevention of these behaviors, while also expanding the understanding of the conditions that foster their occurrence.

Keywords: Adverse childhood experiences, Sexual offenders, Children and adolescents, Sexual violence, Bioecological theory, Human development.

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2011), adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are defined as potentially traumatic events occurring before the age of eighteen that act as sources of stress. In this context, the term "childhood" is used to encompass the period from birth to 18 years of age, as established by the United Nations (UN) in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and adopted by major international frameworks, including WHO documents addressing the construct. Broadly, stress is understood as the perception of a real or imagined threat which, if experienced continuously

and without the presence of a perceived protective adult figure, can compromise the physical and psychological integrity of the child or adolescent (Pedrosa, 2018).

In the seminal study by Felitti et al. (1998), ACEs were categorized into three types of abuse – physical, emotional, and sexual – and four forms of family dysfunction: substance abuse by household members, incarceration, presence of mental or psychological illness or suicide attempts by a family member, and domestic violence directed at the mother. These categories were informed by earlier public health research, such as the *National Health Interview Survey* (1988), and served as the foundation for the development and application of the first version of the *Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire* (ACE-IQ), an instrument designed for retrospective screening based on self-report.

The growing body of literature on ACEs underscores the importance of these events in understanding the impact of trauma on both the physical and mental health of diverse populations. Given its emphasis on the contexts in which human development unfolds, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development (1999–2011) provides a valuable theoretical lens for examining the mechanisms – or the absence thereof – through which ACEs influence individuals' life trajectories (Vega-Arce & Núñez-Ulloa, 2018).

Grounded in a systemic epistemology, Bronfenbrenner proposed the bioecological model of human development (BMHD), conceptualizing development as a phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of the developing individual. These changes emerge from reciprocal interaction processes between personal attributes and environmental contexts. The BMHD organizes human development into structural and functional components: Process (P) – Person (P) – Context (C) – Time (T) (Bronfenbrenner, 1996/2011).

From this perspective, the research about ACEs is broadened, as it seeks to understand not only the content of developmental processes and the environmental forces that shape them, but also the dynamics of these interactions and their developmental outcomes. This approach applies to individuals raised in suboptimal ecological conditions, which may increase the likelihood of adverse developmental outcomes, including engagement in sexually abusive behaviors.

Studies exploring the life trajectories of sexual offenders, as reported in the literature, reveal diverse and heterogeneous characteristics that are not attributable to a single cause but rather to the interaction of dispositional, cognitive, situational, and cultural factors over the course of development (McKillop, Rayment-McHugh, & Bojack, 2020). Understanding sexual offenders within their developmental contexts requires therefore an ecological perspective, taking into account the different systems in which they are embedded and guided by the principle that human development occurs through the interplay between personal characteristics and multiple ecological systems (Habigzang, Koller, Azevedo, & Machado, 2005).

Accordingly, the present study aims to examine perceptions of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) as recounted by sexual offenders against children and adolescents in narratives of their life trajectories, grounded in the theoretical principles of the BMHD.

Methods

Data source and design

The data for this study were derived from a content analysis, based on thematic categories, of interview transcripts originally collected between 2015 and 2016 by members of the research team from the authors' home university, using a non-probabilistic sample.

The original data collection took place in three correctional facilities located in municipalities within a state in northern Brazil. Access to these facilities was granted following approval of the project by the

Research Ethics Committee for Studies Involving Human Participants (Protocol No. 650.210) and through formal authorization issued by the State Department of Penitentiary Administration.

Participants

The dataset comprised full transcriptions of semi-structured interviews with 30 men convicted of sexual crimes against children and adolescents, legally classified in Brazil as *rape of a vulnerable person*.

Participants were recruited in three distinct prison units located in different municipalities within the state. In the first unit, 18 interviews were conducted, with one excluded due to audio recording problems; in the second unit, seven interviews were conducted; and in the third, six. In total, 30 interviews were audio-recorded, subsequently transcribed, and checked for accuracy.

All participants were male, aged between 27 and 70 years at the time of the interview, and had been tried in courts specialized in crimes against children and adolescents, in a northern Brazilian capital. Recruitment followed a non-probabilistic, convenience sampling strategy, based on referrals from prison staff, according to the relevant criminal typology.

Inclusion criteria included: (a) male sex, (b) absence of diagnosed psychotic disorders (e.g., antisocial personality disorder, schizophrenia, severe depression), and (c) absence of organic brain syndrome or any severe medical condition. These criteria were consistent with epidemiological data indicating that men without clinical diagnoses described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) represent most of perpetrators in cases involving sexual aggression against children and adolescents (Serafim et al., 2009).

Instruments

The primary data collection tool was a semi-structured interview script, developed to describe and analyze life-history information from sexual offenders against children and adolescents. The initial version was created by Reis (2016) based on the study by Moura (2007).

The instrument used to define the thematic categories for content analysis was a Portuguese translation of the *Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire* (ACE-IQ; Silva, 2017). This version contains 13 categories subdivided into 31 questions, covering experiences that occurred directly to the individual as well as those indirectly experienced within the family, school, and neighborhood contexts. The categories address: physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; physical and emotional neglect; and various forms of family dysfunction, including alcohol and drug use by household members, incarceration of a family member, family history of mental illness, domestic violence, parental divorce or separation, death of one or both parents, moral violence or bullying, community violence, and collective violence. It is important to note that, in this study, the ACE-IQ was not directly administered to participants. Instead, it served as a framework to guide thematic content analysis of the interview transcripts, with the categories inspired by its items.

Procedures

Each participant took part in one individual interview, lasting approximately two hours and thirty minutes. The interview structure allowed participants to narrate life experiences, describing events during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked by the research team for accuracy.

For analysis, an initial exploratory reading was conducted on the full set of 30 semi-structured interviews. Following Bardin's (1977) content analysis methodology, a "*floating reading*" was performed to identify and group relevant thematic categories addressing the study's primary objective – identifying participants' adverse childhood experiences.

From this exploratory reading, excerpts containing narratives related to ACEs were identified. The

conceptual definition of each experience was based on the questions from the ACE-IQ. In addition, personal factors (e.g., age, education, religion, marital status, race) and situational factors (e.g., age and sex of the victim, relationship to the victim, alcohol or drug use at the time of the offense, recurrence and severity of the offense) were recorded.

The interview corpus was then prepared for content analysis using IRAMUTEQ 0.7 alpha 2 software (Camargo & Justo, 2013, 2015; Ratinaud & Marchand, 2012), a textual analysis tool anchored in the R statistical package and Python language. IRAMUTEQ allows statistical processing of textual data, from simple analyses such as word frequency counts to multivariate analyses including similarity analysis and descending hierarchical classification (DHC; Camargo & Justo, 2013).

For this study, given the need for a substantial textual dataset, a single corpus was constructed containing only excerpts in which participants described experiences fitting the ACE definition provided in the ACE-IQ. This approach allowed for the identification of emergent ACE categories in participants' discourse, as well as developmental aspects associated with these experiences. The corpus was analyzed through DHC, producing a dendrogram of five word-classes.

Results

Overall, 134 text segments were examined, with 88.81% (119 segments) retained for analysis. This process generated five word-classes, grouped by the presence of shared vocabulary. Initially, the IRAMUTEQ software divided the corpus into two subcorpora, separating *Sexual abuse* (class 5) from the remainder of the material. The larger subcorpus was then divided again, producing *Moral violence, bullying, or involvement in physical fights* (Class 4). A third partition yielded *Parental death and Substance abuse by family members* (class 1). Finally, the remaining material was split into two additional classes: *Physical abuse and domestic violence* (class 3) and *Neglect and parental separation* (class 2) (Figure 1).

Examination of the class relationships depicted in the dendrogram revealed that *Sexual abuse* (class 5) contains verbal content that is both specific and distinct from the other classes. This suggests that the vocabulary used by participants to describe experiences of sexual abuse or inappropriate sexual approaches during childhood and adolescence is more precise, reflecting their perception of these events as a negative thing. However, this does not imply that such experiences occurred in isolation. Rather, the isolation of this class in the dendrogram suggests that it appears in participants' narratives with a highly specific lexical pattern, verbally distinct from the other classes. Core elements of this pattern include: the age at which the abuse reportedly occurred (e.g., 8 years, 13 years), the primary perpetrators (e.g., neighbor, old man, woman, boy), associated feelings and circumstances (e.g., fear, exchange, keep, tell), and explicit references to the acts themselves (e.g., sex, sexual intercourse, sexual abuse, "they abused me").

The analysis also revealed a greater textual similarity between *Physical abuse and domestic violence* (class 3) and *Neglect and parental separation* (Class 2), indicating that these experiences were recounted by sexual offenders in a contiguous manner, without significant distinction, thereby displaying a correspondence relationship.

Parental death and substance abuse by family members (class 1) showed an indirect connection with classes 3 and 2, while differing from Moral violence, bullying, and involvement in physical fights (class 4). This relationship can be explained by the context in which the ACEs represented in classes 1, 2, and 3 occurred – namely, the family environment – and by the central role of parents in these experiences. This role was expressed through: (a) their definitive absence due to death (class 1); (b) their temporary absence related to neglect or parental separation, leading to the distancing of one parent (class 2); or (c) their direct involvement as perpetrators of physical abuse used as a form of discipline (class 3).

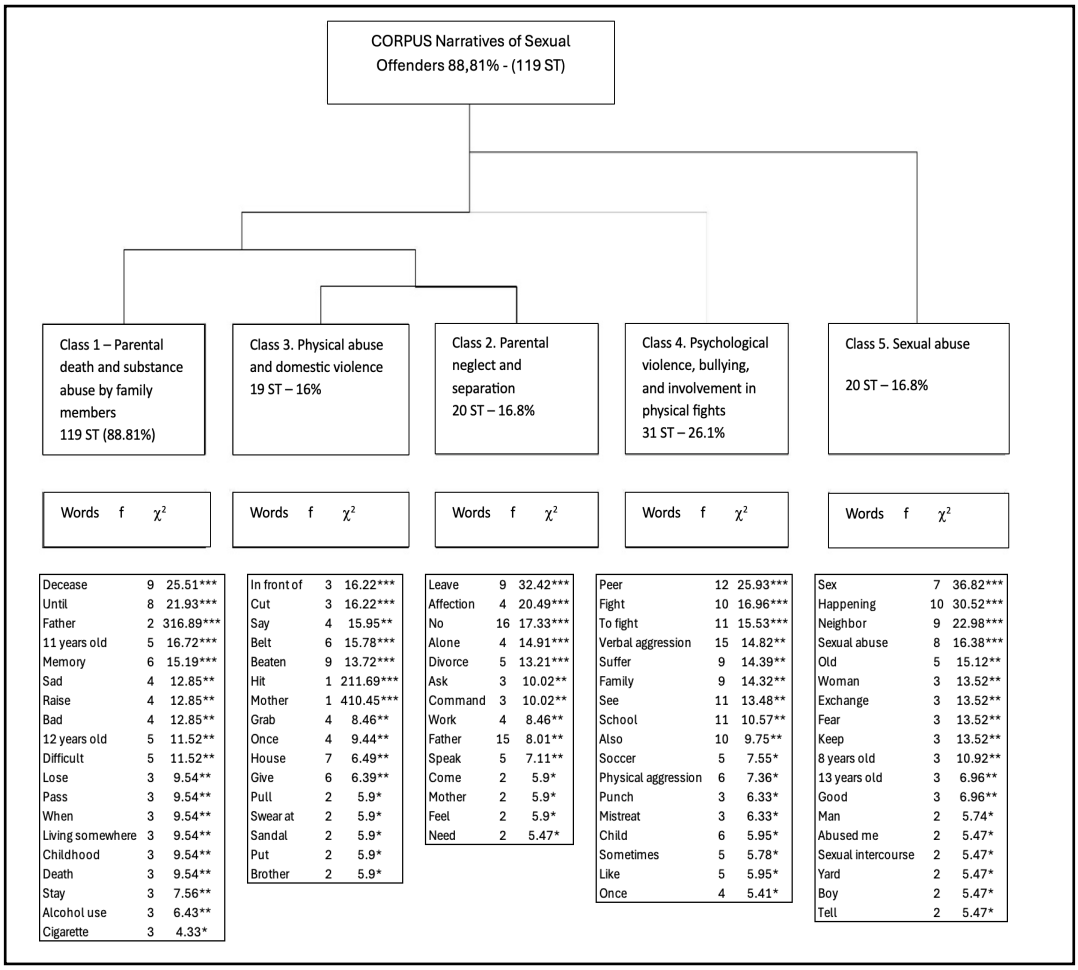

Figure 1. Dendogram describing the correspondence factor analysis of narratives from sex offenders (descending hierarchical classification)

Discussion

Based on the subdivision performed by the IRAMUTEQ software, excerpts or representative passages from the classes identified in the interviews are discussed below, organized into three categories: family context, psychological violence and bullying, and sexual abuse.

Family context (class 1, class 2, and class 3)

> *"When I was 12 years old, my stepfather consumed alcoholic beverages and pushed my mother. That was my negative memory; I was raised by my mother and stepfather, and I did not have the pleasure of knowing my father (...) negative episodes during adolescence – now I can speak about the loss of my stepfather, who passed away"* (P21, class 1)

> *"My father (...) would leave the house in the afternoon and only return the next morning; we were left alone (...) we went to live in a zinc-roofed house, and our bed was made from flour sacks. My father would not allow us to go to school; he encouraged us to work, saying that work makes a man and that one does not need to study to become someone in life"* (P24, class 2)

> *"Aggressions from my father were frequent. He would hit me, beat me, make me and my siblings kneel on corn kernels or on soda bottle caps; he struck with a belt, with a hammer, with a pressure cooker. My father assaulted my mother, came home and broke down the door,*

hit her suddenly, insulted her, and used profanities" (P19, Class 3)

Being a relatively common occurrence in the lives of individuals with diverse developmental trajectories, the death of a parent presents one of the most delicate implications for the child's life: the necessity of family restructuring in its aftermath. Words associated with this thematic class – such as *raise*, *living somewhere*, *go through*, and *stay* – indicate that such restructuring often involves leaving the original household or the incorporation of a new partner or extended family members (e.g., uncles, grandparents) as primary caregivers for the orphaned child. This situation represents a discontinuity in the proximal processes previously established with the parents.

In the excerpt from P24, parental work emerges as an element of the exosystem – an environmental context in which the child is not directly involved but which nonetheless exerts significant influence over the provision of physical and emotional care. The terms *work*, *leave*, *alone*, and *affection* suggest that the developmental space for interpersonal interactions characterized by parental affection is impaired by the demands of work, often under precarious conditions. Extended working hours oblige parents to leave their children either unsupervised or in the care of extended family or neighbors – a context that may be conducive to various forms of abuse, given the absence of direct supervision by primary caregivers. This parental absence suggests that both maternal and paternal responsiveness may have been restricted in the lives of the participants, thereby diminishing its buffering role against difficulties in emotional, behavioral, and environmental regulation arising from a toxic environment.

The account from P19 illustrates a possible hostile relationship between father and mother. From a bio-ecological perspective, such relational dynamics may generate second-order effects on the developmental processes of the child, potentially undermining the construction of the mother–child dyad by inhibiting proximal processes and fostering negative interpersonal feelings toward the parents. In light of these considerations, it is plausible to assert that antagonism within the marital dyad – here, between husband and wife – can produce disruptive effects on the mother–child dyad, reducing its effectiveness as a socialization context. Among the potential consequences is the adoption of more aggressive behaviors by the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979/1996).

When, within a family microsystem, the mother experiences physical abuse perpetrated by the father – who in this context functions as the secondary caregiver – he serves as a relational model for the children, acting as a mirror for both members of the dyad. This mirroring can contribute to the adoption of physical punishment by mothers who themselves have been victims of physical violence, as a means of educating and communicating with their children, particularly when they bear sole responsibility for care and protection (Silva, 2019; Saffioti, 2004). For children, hostile interactions between parents witnessed during childhood tend to become an internalized relational model, which may later structure their interpersonal interactions in adulthood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979/1996).

These second-order effects can be observed in the accounts of sexual offenders through the absence of one of the fundamental conditions of dyadic relationships – alongside reciprocity and the establishment of an affective bond – namely, the balance of power. Mothers who employ physical abuse recurrently as their main disciplinary method also contribute to the inhibition of their children's cognitive and social development. When such strategies are consistently adopted, victims may perpetuate them as a means of managing power dynamics encountered later in their ecological environments. An example of this is the power relation between men and women and between adults and children – relations of inequality that lie at the core of the debate on the sexual aggression of children and adolescents (Marchi & Sarmento, 2017).

Psychological violence and bullying (class 4)

"I suffered bullying at school, you know? They picked on me, I suffered bullying at school, and that pushed me away from school; I started

> *getting into fights (...) I was afraid to tell my parents, my family – they didn't have time for me. It was more because of appearance, you know? Aesthetic.* 'Oh! My skin color'. *I was born the only little black piece of coal in the family; my siblings were born white (...) there was even a massacre at the police station in my neighborhood, my neighborhood was very violent. At night there would be fights, rival gang confrontations"* (P19, class 4)

This excerpt, representative of class 4 (*psychological violence and bullying*), illustrates that peer conflicts permeated participants' transition from childhood to adolescence, with the boundary between victim and aggressor often being unclear. In most accounts, individuals had alternated between both positions over time. In this sense, class 4 refers to a period characterized by intense normative ecological transitions within the mesosystem – defined as the interrelation between the boundaries of two or more microsystems in which the developing person is an active participant. The ecological transition in question involves both a change in social role – from childhood to adolescence, from boy to man – and a change in environment, given that these experiences occurred at the boundaries between family, school, neighborhood, and peer groups.

In this context, it is relevant to discuss the importance of supportive bonds that facilitate an individual's transition from one environment to another, functioning as a source of security and enhancing the developmental potential of such transitions. According to the participants' accounts, an analysis of the preceding classes reveals that the family and school microsystems were weakly connected, as inter-environment communication was scarce. This can be seen in P19's statement regarding the lack of trust in his parents to share experiences of bullying and racism he suffered at school.

Examining participants' involvement in physical fights during childhood and adolescence reveals the influence of belief systems concerning the social role dictated by patterns of masculinity. During the socialization process, boys are often encouraged to engage in aggressive and risky behaviors – behaviors that become socially expected once they assume their role as adult men. The unequal social expectations placed upon men and women can influence gender relations both in childhood and in adulthood (Saffioti, 2004). In this sense, engagement in fights constitutes a type of interpersonal activity and relationship legitimized by the social expectations of male competitiveness, rooted in the patriarchal system that structures Western society.

It is possible that response patterns involving aggressiveness, impulsivity, and difficulty in delaying gratification – described by individuals convicted of sexual offenses against children and adolescents and verbalized as personal temperament traits expressed since childhood – were developed as behavioral dispositions or developmentally disruptive forces. These response patterns function as differential responses to contextually, culturally, and socially defined demands, representing what Bronfenbrenner refers to as "temperament-in-context" (Bronfenbrenner, 1999/2011, p. 163). In a context where expectations and social coexistence are shaped by aggressive interactions – such as within the family, the neighborhood, and other spaces of socialization – the engagement in potentially violent behavioral patterns and the construction of a belief system based on such interactions may be facilitated until they become consolidated as personal temperament characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1999/2011, p. 163).

Sexual abuse (class 5)

> *"I went through this experience of sexual abuse; I remember that I was about 7 years old, and this boy was around 13 and was a neighbor. I liked playing house with my cousins in the backyard, with friends from the neighborhood (...) my mother found out and forbade him from coming in (...) The nanny of one of my nephews, who was much older than I was, was lying on the bed, and she forcibly sat on top of me, causing me to bleed" (P4, class 5)*

The accounts describing experiences of sexual abuse reveal the severity of this ACE and highlight its importance for understanding the later involvement

of these participants in sexually abusive behaviors toward children and adolescents. It is evident that such experiences occurred in environments that should have been protective, such as the home, the neighborhood, and the school (P19).

Terms such as *family*, *neighbor*, *cousin*, *woman*, and *older* within this thematic grouping indicate that the primary perpetrators of these sexual aggressions were individuals in close proximity to the victim and who enjoyed the trust of either the victim or their parents. Moreover, these terms confirm the variability of characteristics found among sexual offenders against children and adolescents, including within the life trajectories of individuals who themselves later became perpetrators. Such offenders may be younger – of a similar age to the victim (e.g., cousins) – or older, male or female, illustrating the heterogeneity of this group, a finding extensively documented in the literature on sexual aggression (Costa, Cavalcante, & Reis, 2018).

The diversity of possible offender profiles during the childhood of sexual offenders also reflects the different ways in which participants, as children, may have perceived these abuses. While the use of the expression *sexual abuse* makes explicit the seriousness of the experience, the use of the term *sex* suggests that the boundary between consensual sexual activity and forced sexual contact may not have been entirely clear to these individuals at the time the event occurred. It is plausible that the coexistence of ambivalent feelings toward the abusive experience – such as fear and affection – combined with the influence of a cultural context that legitimizes sexual relations between adults and adolescents, may have interfered with the conceptualization of the experience as sexual abuse (Engel, 2017).

In this sense, adherence to rigid male sexual role norms may facilitate both the acceptance of sexual abuse during childhood or adolescence when the perpetrator is a woman, and the predisposition to commit sexual abuse in the future. These experiences can reinforce gender beliefs reflected in attitudes related to male power, relational control, the acceptability of violence, and apathy toward others. This suggests that both experiencing and perpetrating some form of sexual abuse may represent potential pathways for exploring and asserting one's masculinity (Rizzo, Banyard, & Edward, 2020; Miller et al., 2020).

From a bioecological perspective, *Person (P) characteristics* are understood as socioemotional, motivational, and cognitive attributes, either considered as hereditary or shaped through interaction with the environment. These characteristics result from the joint functioning of individual potentialities and environmental elements experienced throughout the life course in a given historical period, operating as a self-reinforcing process of personal construction, whereby the characteristics of the person are shaped by their environment.

In a situation of sexual abuse experienced during childhood, in which the child is placed in a position of complete submission and disempowerment over their own body, it is possible that aggressive potentials are activated as a means of coping with other adverse subsequent situations. This may generate selective responses to that type of situation or to similar circumstances. Such selective responses, constructed from the experience of sexual abuse, become cognitively structured. This means that the experience is conceptualized by the person who lived through it, and that the selective responses developed from it subsequently guide the individual's directive belief system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998/2006).

Conversely, active biopsychological resources can be expressed as skills and knowledge acquired through prior experiences that enable effective engagement in proximal processes. From this perspective, in the face of the adverse experiences endured by sexual offenders of children and adolescents during early childhood – primarily involving physical abuse and neglect – the resources developed for coping with risk and threat situations may be limited to passivity and lack of trust. The learning of ineffective interaction patterns in previous ACEs may interfere with

help-seeking in situations of sexual abuse (Alaggia, 2010). This type of reaction to abuse can be seen, for instance, in the emergence of the word *maintain*, illustrating that, in the face of suffering, the chosen course of action involves silence and tolerance of the suffering derived from this experience.

Finally, *demand characteristics* – understood as attributes that have the potential to invite or discourage reactions from individuals in the immediate environment – may be expressed as temperament or personality traits. For example, shyer children appear to exhibit a greater potential vulnerability to abuse situations, as they tend to attract fewer potentially protective interactions (Alaggia, 2010). Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner notes that demographic characteristics such as age, gender, social class, and ethnia also have the potential to define the environmental niches in which the individual is embedded, influencing social role expectations across life course.

Within the *Time* (T) dimension, it is important to note that the reported sexual abuse situations occurred during critical developmental stages of sexual offenders of children and adolescents, provoking abrupt changes in their activities, relationships, and roles in their immediate context (*microtime*), or occurring regularly over extended periods (*mesotime*), sometimes spanning more than one developmental stage, in both childhood and adolescence. Additionally, it is necessary to consider the degree of instability, inconsistency, and unpredictability produced by sexual abuse situations, which are often accompanied by threats and even physical aggression.

The *Process* (P) dimension permeates all the aforementioned elements. The processes established with significant others within the microsystems where these individuals developed could strengthen, weaken, or shape personal characteristics. For example, peer groups may reinforce beliefs about virile sexuality, while neglectful or physically violent families may strengthen the belief that children and adolescents must be submissive to the unrestricted will of adults, or that their sexuality and labor can be appropriated by these adults.

It is important to emphasize that the experience of sexual abuse – especially when it occurs over long periods – has the capacity to shape perceptions and instill beliefs about concepts such as childhood, violence, and sexuality. These beliefs may subsequently guide future actions and interpersonal relationships (Reis, 2016). Such face-to-face interactions may also generate perceptions that are later reinforced through the consolidation of a belief system embedded in the *macrosystem*, mediating the individual's relationship with both real and symbolic environment.

Examples of such beliefs, as found in the narratives of sexual offenders of children and adolescents, include: children and adolescents can consent to sexual activities with adults and can derive satisfaction from such experiences; adolescents are fully developed individuals capable of taking responsibility for their actions; adults may impose their will upon children; and males may impose their power upon females. These beliefs function as a central element in the engagement in sexually abusive behaviors, representing one of the developmental outcomes of the interaction of the BMHD elements across the offenders' life trajectories.

It is therefore considered that the proposed objective of this study was achieved, insofar as it was found that the adverse childhood experiences lived in the participants' interpersonal relationships – combined with the lack of developmental resources to deal with adverse situations in varied contexts – may have significantly influenced these individuals' behaviors, resulting in engagement in sexually abusive conduct as a risk behavior.

Finally, certain limitations related to this study of ACE should be acknowledged. The construct is based on a retrospective self-report questionnaire, which may not accurately capture events occurring during the first 18 years of life, depending on the quality of memory construction, the time elapsed, or the

participant's current health status. These factors may influence the under- or over-reporting of the frequency and intensity of events, whether in favor of third parties or due to the difficulty of recounting situations experienced as adverse – thus tending toward underreporting (Felitti et al., 1998; Rodrigues, 2016). Additionally, this is a culturally mediated concept that depends on the individual's perception of the experience, such that older adults, for example, may have a culturally different view, compared to adolescents and young adults, potentially considering certain experiences as non-damaging (Dias, Sales, Hessen, & Kleber, 2015).

In conclusion, this study contributes not only to raising awareness of the risk factors for the development of sexually aggressive behavior, but also to highlighting the importance of protective factors, which can mediate the relationship between exposure to ACEs and negative developmental outcomes. Even in adverse circumstances, factors such as strong affective relationships with significant others, community involvement, greater stability in interactions and contexts, the development of more functional belief systems, and positive parenting programs can buffer the negative effects of ACEs. These may significantly reduce the likelihood and magnitude of dysfunction outcomes and potentially alter the developmental course of these individuals. Such change must be implemented through the development of remedial and preventive public policies aimed at addressing this complex phenomenon, including services for victims, measures to minimize recidivism among offenders, and educational initiatives to reduce violence.

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