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Research Article

Exploring Emerging Adulthood and Adverse Childhood Experiences' Effect on Psychosocial Well-Being

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Childhood experiences have been documented to influence later life of individuals especially in emerging adult which is the immediate period after adolescent where young adults strive to define their identity and purpose. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur before a child gets to the age of 18. The purpose of the study was to explore the emerging adults ACEs and the psychosocial well-being in later life. This study aligned to the interpretivist paradigm which informed the use of the hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative design. Homogeneous purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select 15 participants (Males=6; Females=9) in three public universities in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. An interview guide was used to gather data from the participants. Thematic analysis showed that participants ACEs have made them perceive life differently which inform the way they view life satisfaction and also build relationship with others. Five themes and sub-themes were identified as: (1) Self-image: with sub-themes (a) self-confidence and (b) Parentification; (2) Social connections with sub-themes: (a) Belongingness and (b) Emotional loneliness; (3) Meaning-making with sub-themes: (a) Trust issues and (b) Disregard for a child's viewpoint; (4) Exhibition by parents and (5) Suicide. It is recommended that mental health professionals should teach affected individuals some behavioural changes including building resilience.

Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage that is characterized as a unique and transformative life stage of individuals aged 18 to 29, particularly in developing and developed nations[1]. This period was proposed by Jeffrey Arnett in his theory of emerging adulthood and is characterized by exploration, self-

discovery, and a quest for meaning and purpose. It is a time marked by experimentation, instability, and a focus on personal identity, during which young adults are faced with significant life choices; including career paths, relationship formation, and self-definition. The concept of this life stage has become increasingly relevant over the past fifty years as is driven by shifts in education and industrialization. This is in contrast to previous generations, where young women and men often assumed stable adult roles in work and family life by their late teens and early twenties[2], today's youth are more likely to prioritize education and personal development.

In Ghana, for instance, it is reported that an appreciable number of emerging adults (93%) are in school or learning a trade as compared to some years past[3]. However, the issue of youth unemployment is still a challenge. Whereas the average age of marriage and family life is around 23 years, the majority of the married emerging adults are in rural areas with few in urban areas. This shift in the emerging adults' roles may be caused by cultural, economic, and societal factors which underscores the changing landscape of adulthood and the increasing importance of this formative stage in shaping individual trajectories.

One of the key characteristics of emerging adulthood is identity formation which involves the process of making sense of one's past experiences, especially those from childhood, and integrating them into a coherent sense of self. This phase of the emerging adult is when individuals reflect on who they are, and their values by culture, religion, economic status, education, and exposures in life to inform their goals for the future[4]. The experiences in parenting, peers, cultural norms, education, health, or even witnessing what others go through by individuals can profoundly shape one's identity, personality, and overall well-being as individuals transition into adulthood. These early influences often play a pivotal role in how people perceive the world, interact with others, and make decisions in their adult life. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) may play a significant role in shaping this process. The experiences individuals go through in their early years, whether they are positive or negative, often have a lasting impact on how they view themselves, interact with others, and make decisions about their future[5][6].

Emerging Adults and ACEs

ACEs encompass a range of traumatic events occurring before the age of 18 which include violence, abuse, neglect, and exposure to familial instability or substance use issues. These experiences can severely undermine a child's sense of safety and stability[5]. The repercussions of ACEs extend beyond immediate

trauma, as individuals may face heightened risks for physical and mental health challenges throughout their lives[7]. Research has shown that university students with a history of ACEs often report elevated levels of anxiety and depression[8][9]. The influence of childhood experiences on later life outcomes is well-documented to affect intrapersonal and interpersonal well-being[10]. These experiences can yield positive or negative effects on an individual's overall well-being[8][11].

Furthermore, studies indicate that females tend to report higher levels of psychological distress compared to males, a disparity influenced by socioeconomic factors, historical contexts, and age[12][13][14]. Resilience in emerging adults who have experienced ACEs can be bolstered by self-righting appraisal skills and social support to facilitate positive growth and adaptability[15]. ACEs can hinder the development of secure attachments, leading to mistrust and attachment issues in adulthood[16]. Conversely, individuals with secure attachments tend to exhibit greater confidence and trust, enhancing their self-esteem, judgment, empathy, and interpersonal relationships[4]. Those who have faced adversities may struggle with feelings of betrayal in relationships, secrecy, anxiety, and a lack of safety, often resulting in social isolation[16].

Child Discipline, Emerging Adults and ACEs

The Ghana constitution recognizes individuals aged 18 years and above as adults, granting them the legal right to assume various adult roles, such as marriage and employment[17]. This life stage is characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, a feeling of being in between adolescence and adulthood, and a sense of broad possibilities for the future[1]. The Ghanaian cultural endorsements of corporal punishment (e.g., spanking and demeaning children) are viewed as an acceptable way to enhance the character and promote learning[18][19]. The World Health Organization[20] reported that one-quarter of all adults claimed to have been physically abused in childhood and that 1 in 5 females also claimed to be sexually abused in childhood. In Ghana, it was estimated that 3.4 million Ghanaian children had been physically or emotionally abused. This cost the country over USD 200 million or 1% of Ghana's GDP to take care of the abused children[21]. The UNICEF Ghana report also indicated that, children in Ghana experience frequent and multiple forms of physical, emotional, and verbal abuse and violence. In the same report, the Child Protection baseline research indicated that over 57% of children in Ghana (14–17 years of age) reported being beaten as a form of physical discipline at home. 34% of the children in both the rural and urban areas confirmed being beaten in school as a form of discipline.

Research conducted in several low- and middle-income countries has highlighted the impact of parenting styles and school discipline on childhood trauma[18][22][15]. Studies indicate that authoritarian parenting can lead to negative outcomes in children, including feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem, and diminished academic success. Such children often exhibit increased hostility and aggression, struggle with peer relationships, and are more prone to substance abuse during adolescence, particularly when compared to those raised in non-authoritative environments. In many African cultures, verbal and physical abuse have become normalized aspects of child-rearing, resulting in numerous ACEs for many children[18][22].

Emerging Adulthood and Adlerian Theory

The Adlerian theory describes how early life experiences may significantly influence later life development. Alfred Adler[23] believes that the individual begins to form an approach to life somewhere in the first 6 years of living. He focused on the person's subjective interpretation of reality (phenomenology) of early events that continued to influence the person's present behavior; that is, themes running through a person's life[24]. Adler[25] referred to the emerging adult's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, convictions, and conclusions as their subjective reality which has to do with the meanings they attached to their experiences. According to Adler[23], emerging adults who have a sense of belonging will feel loved and form healthy, loving bonds with others. But those who feel unloved will act out to express that feeling of inadequacy. The emerging adult learns to overcome inferiority through the nurturing of parents and other interactions within their environment. Most often in Ghana, parents punish children's bad behavior as a form of discipline to remove or reduce the bad behavior[19].

The Adlerian theory believes that children may misbehave because they feel discouraged, and because they do not make meaning out of parental discipline, they feel unloved, devalued, or unsupported. Adler sees social interest as the action for community feeling which involves mutual concern between people. Community feeling is described as a feeling of belonging which is characterised by courage, empathy, caring, compassion, engagement, and cooperation[24]. People strive to belong in the family system to ensure security, worthiness, and acceptance. Emerging adults who are not able to develop this community feeling become discouraged and develop antisocial behaviours such as addictions, suicide, self-hurting, and other mental health issues[24]. Adler[23] assumed that birth order had a significant and

predictable impact on a child's personality and their feeling of inferiority. The birth order describes how the family dynamics and home environment influence the personality of a person.

Emerging adulthood and Choice theory

The Choice theory by Dr. William Glasser[26] explores the needs of emerging adults and their disappointment when the people around them vis-à-vis the parents and other caregivers do not meet their expectations of making them happy and satisfied in life. Glasser stated that each individual has the power to control the self and has limited power to control others, resulting in a conflict. It emphasizes that the development of close, caring relationships ensures the effective fulfillment of one's needs and achieves happiness. Glasser[27] believes that genetically human beings are wired with five basic needs he coined as genetic instructions (survival, love and belonging, power or achievement, freedom or independence, and fun or enjoyment) which drive the individual. The theory emphasized the need for love and belonging to be man's primary need, which explains why mental health challenges are often related to relationships.

Glasser, therefore, recommended adopting seven connecting relationship habits in all relationships. These are: supporting, encouraging, listening, accepting, trusting, respecting, and negotiating differences. He also cited seven disconnecting habits that are used to control people, resulting in misunderstandings and resentment, thereby breaking down relationships. These seven disconnected habits are criticising, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, and bribing or rewarding to control. Emerging adults who faced criticism, harassment, emotional and verbal abuse from caregivers with the intent of making them learn to achieve communal living ended up making them rather having challenges trusting others and developing low self-confidence with suicidal thoughts.

The study sought to explore the effects of ACEs on emerging adulthoods' psychosocial well-being. The aim is to provide valuable insights into how individuals navigate the challenges of identity, belonging, and purpose in this formative stage of life.

Method

Research Design

I approached the current study with the interpretivist paradigm which asserts that there are multiple realities out there. Individuals make meaning through their interactions with their environment in their

minds[28]. I adopted the qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design to explore the multiple lived experiences and the meanings that the university students attached to their ACEs as I explored their psychosocial well-being based on their experiences.

Participants

A combination of homogeneous purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to sample the participants with the help of a priori thematic and data saturation. These sampling techniques are based on the research problem, purpose, and questions[29]. Homogeneous purposive sampling was used to select participants based on having similar characteristics because such characteristics are of particular interest to the research[29]. Given[30] described snowballing as when existing research participants refer new potential participants whom they share a similar interest relevant to the current research or are members of the same group to the researcher. Inclusion criteria for selection of participants included the following: being in the age range of emerging adults, self-identify as having experienced ACEs and willingness to participate in the study.

The homogeneous purposive sampling technique helped to identify 6 participants (2 females and 4 males) who had reported their ACE challenges to the counselling centres in the three public universities in Greater Accra, Ghana, and were willing to be part of the study while the snowballing was used when participates who were selected through the homogeneous purposive technique also directed the researcher, to some of their colleagues who had also suffered from ACEs to be included in the study. Nine participants (7 females and 2 males) were selected using the snowballing. The median age of participants was 24 years (M = 23.6 years; SD = 2.47). Majority of them (n = 12; 80%) indicated they had suicidal ideations. Almost half (n = 7; 46.7%) admitted they either use or are addicted to some substance. The majority (n = 12; 80%) again indicated they were engaged in some form of intimate relationship.

Data Collection Procedure

Ethical clearance was sought from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Professional Studies, Accra (Reference number: ECUPSA –SS-001-2023). Introductory letters from the Department of Counselling Psychology of the University of Education, Winneba were submitted to the three selected public universities to seek permission for data collection. With the homogeneous sampling, counsellors at the university introduced some students who had reported their ACEs at the counselling centers. After the introduction, participants answered the ACEs questionnaire to ascertain their eligibility for the study.

When participants indicated at least two 'yeses' on the ACEs questionnaire, they were deemed eligible. Research suggests that a person with more than one 'yes' on the ACEs questionnaire has an 87% chance of going through two or more ACEs[31]. The researcher used the Interview Question Development Matrix (IQDM) to frame the semi-structured interview guide to ensure conformity with the research questions. IQDM is a format used to develop interview questions based on reviewed literature[32]. In this study, questions were aligned to the literature on emerging adults and ACEs. Consideration was given to anonymity and confidentiality to participate in the study, hence the use of pseudonyms names chosen by the participants. Field data was managed under the Data Protection Act, 2012 (Act 843) of Ghana[33]. The interviews were audio-taped using an electronic recorder and transcribed verbatim.

Contact between the researcher and the participants occurred four times: (i) the first was to build rapport and explain the purpose of the study to participants; (ii) the second contact was the interview which lasted between 30-40 minutes and recorded on an audio recorder with double encryption for protection; (iii) the third was to double check how participants had fared after the interview and to assess how the sharing of their experiences was affecting their minds and bodies, resources they used to get over the memories, and any remembering that participants felt they wanted included in their narratives; (iv) after the transcription and development of themes, participants were given a chance to check if the transcription was an accurate recording of their narratives. They also had a chance to check if the themes reflected their experiences. This final meeting was also to say 'thank you' to participants for taking part in the study. The researcher used her counselling knowledge and skills to help participants who had flashbacks during the interviews and later referred to the counsellors of their university for further therapy. To ensure the researcher did not experience any vicarious trauma from the stories that participants shared with her, the supervisor provided a structured and regular debriefing. This process served two purposes, firstly to provide both research and clinical oversight in psychological and academic care for the researcher during the writing process, and secondly to serve as bracketing and audit trail which is necessary for trustworthiness in the qualitative research process[34].

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's[35] thematic analysis framework was used for the data analysis. The first step was for the researcher to read and think through the data to get a deeper understanding into the insight of the participants' emotional state about the phenomenon as a way of familiarization. The next step was to code the data. The author reviewed the identified codes, themes and sub-themes for the refinements to

generate the report. Themes were formed using theoretical triangulation since the study is underpinned by theoretical reviews and also uses the interpretive worldview[36].

Methodological integrity

To ensure data quality assurance and reliability, a number of tactics were used. Credibility of the study was ensured by the use of multiple transcript reviews and audio reviews of the interviews. The transcribed written summaries of the interviews were given to the participants for review and approval. The researcher also read through the study and offered feedback. Prolonged engagements with the participants also ensured a deeper understanding of the phenomenon for the lead researcher and also helped the participants build trust. The written notes were used to complement the transcriptions most especially for the information that was not recorded on the tape recorder. The current study ensured transferability by providing a vivid description of the participants' account of their experiences with ACEs. Confirmability was achieved through the keeping of a calendar of interviews and written activities. The participants were made to review the transcripts and all written documents at different stages of the study. The researcher checked and reviewed the documents and critiqued them to ensure the dependability of the research findings.

Results

Participants

Participants included 15 emerging adults (9 females and 6 males) within three public universities in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Among the participants interviewed 7 reported that their parents are still married while 4 reported that their parents were divorced and 4 were born out of wedlock. Most of the participants from broken homes reported some adverse experiences that they had with either the stepmother or father. Most of the participants born out of wedlock stayed with either their grandparents or other extended family members. See Table 1.

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Parental marriage status	ACEs Score	Suicidal Ideation/ Thought	Substance Abuse	Being in a Relationship
Awurasi	20	F	Together	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lamisi	20	F	Out of wedlock	6	Yes	No	No
Yaw	25	M	Together	3	Yes	No	Yes
Elorm	28	M	Divorced	6	Yes	No	Yes
Candice	24	F	Together	7	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hajia	22	F	Together	4	Yes	No	No
Nips	24	M	Together	2	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tracy	22	F	Divorced	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
Abena	24	F	Together	6	No	Yes	Yes
Abla	27	F	Divorced	7	No	No	Yes
Akua	22	F	Out of wedlock	4	Yes	Yes	No
Nii	27	M	Divorced	8	No	No	Yes
Crystabel	22	F	Together	4	Yes	No	Yes
Ayitey	22	M	Out of wedlock	7	Yes	No	Yes
William	25	M	Out of wedlock	4	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Themes

Five themes emanated from the participants' narratives as: (1) Self-image: with sub-themes (a) self-confidence and (b) Parentification; (2) Social connections with sub-themes: (a) Belongingness and (b) Emotional loneliness; (3) Meaning-making with sub-themes: (a) Trust issues and (b) Disregard for a child's viewpoint; (4) Exhibition by parents and (5) Suicide.

Theme 1: Self-image: sub-themes (a) Self-confidence (b) Parentification

Theme 1 explores participants' self-image as some participants shared experiences of their upbringing and humiliation during childhood and how these events have shaped their perception of themselves and their interpretation of reality. The sub-theme on self-confidence describes how participants' experiences of abuse and humiliation led some to develop an inferiority complex, causing them to appear timid and nervous. For instance, Ayitey described his childhood as a boy who was raised by a single mother and a grandmother in a poor home. He stated that the restrictions from the women who raised him; have made him become a timid boy to the extent that he cannot even ride a bicycle. He feels boys should be trained by their fathers and not the other way around. Awurasi also had this to say; "I feel like humiliation played a big role in my life, I am leaving with trust issues and anxiety."

The second sub-theme on parentification explored how participants expressed not enjoying their childhood because they had to practice some adulthood roles for which they were not ready. Crystabel stated: "It was not really funny. Yeah, I'm the first child of five children and they turn to use our childhood as junior mothers to your siblings especially if you are the firstborn daughter. I feel like it had a lot of responsibilities that I was not probably ready for at that age." Nips added: "Because I was the firstborn, I was like their experiment. They were extra tough on me. I stepped into certain boundaries I should not have crossed in the name of enjoying my freedom because I was always under their control." Emerging adults who are made to play adult roles at a younger age tend not to enjoy their childhood and are made to mature earlier than their age mates. Early experiences explain certain later life personalities like insecurities and interpersonal issues.

Theme 2: Social connections: Belongingness and Emotional loneliness

The second theme looked at the participants' social connections in relation to their sense of belongingness and emotional loneliness. The first sub-theme explores how cultural influences played a significant role in how participants viewed their connections. In Ghana, where inheritance can follow either matrilineal or patrilineal lines, some participants felt out of place due to their family structure. Ayitey, for instance, described feeling alienated during family gatherings because, despite inheriting through the patrilineal system, he was raised by his mother's family. He explained that during family meetings, he was often dismissed or told to remain silent, reinforcing his sense of not belonging to his mother's family lineage.

Beyond family and cultural influences, many participants spoke about how past disappointments in relationships made them more cautious when entering new ones. They often compartmentalize relationships and set clear boundaries to protect themselves from further emotional pain. Nips, for example, explained that he keeps his relationships strictly academic, limiting interactions to course-related matters. Crystabel shared that if she didn't feel appreciated or respected in a relationship, she would become defensive and cut ties, moving on without looking back. Some participants also highlighted the importance of shared interests when forming connections. Awurasi said that when she finds someone who truly understands her, she tries to nurture the relationship by staying in touch. Similarly, Akua spoke about the value of supportive friendships, particularly with people who share her passions, and how she regularly engages with them.

The second sub-theme of emotional loneliness looked at how participants 'childhood experiences have shaped their commitment to family and the way they define friendships. For some, growing up with a single parent led to a feeling of emotional deprivation, which they sought to fulfill through relationships with others. Tracy, for example, expressed a longing for a father-daughter relationship, and when forming friendships with men, she often expected to be treated in a certain way, though this expectation was rarely met. This is what Tracy stated: "There is always this part of me who wants to have a father-daughter relationship so when I make friends with the opposite sex, I intend to want to be treated in a certain way and well it never really happens".

Overall, the participants' stories reflect how their past experiences of love, connection, and rejection influence how they form and evaluate relationships in order to avoid the emotional pain they experienced in childhood.

Theme 3: Meaning-making (Trust issues and Disregard for a child's viewpoint)

The participants expressed their displeasure with how their emotions and views were treated as trivial in the family. According to the authoritative parenting style, parents who are firm, set limits and goals, discipline their children through guidance and encourage independence instill in their children good social skills, self-reliance, and independence. Two sub-themes emerged: trust issues and disregard for a child's viewpoint.

The sub-theme on trust issues was expressed by several participants, with some indicating that they did not trust anyone with their secrets and problems, fearing that others would discuss them behind their backs. Participants shared that their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, convictions, and

conclusions in life reflect the meaning they have attached to their past experiences. For instance, Hajia stated that:

> I cannot trust anyone with my secrets and problems. They will discuss it when they are less busy. I
> will meet them one day and they will start saying it. Is either I keep it or yeah.

Crystabel shared: "I grew up with a lot of insecurities. As a child, I was taught to be self-sufficient and to rely on myself. It's very difficult to open up to others when I have problems, even when people show genuine care and interest in what I have to say. I still second-guess myself. As a result, I come across as overly confident. I pretend that I don't want help or that I don't have emotions." This lack of trust may lead to feelings of isolation and reluctance to seek support from others when facing challenges, which could contribute to ongoing intrapersonal conflicts like anxiety and loneliness.

The sub-theme on the disregard for a child's viewpoint explored how children who were not given the opportunity to take part in decisions or whose opinions do not matter in the family are faced with decision-making growing up. In most African homes, a child is to be seen and not to be heard. Elorm saw himself as timid, unable to take initiative or stand up for himself due to the way he was raised. He explained: "I feel timid because I was brought up in a way that you only speak when asked, and now I'm afraid to speak the truth or say the right things to adults." Nips added: "I felt like my opinions didn't matter, so I stopped contributing. It made me unhappy and made me feel like I wasn't part of the family because my views were disregarded. I had to live in a way that would prevent my parents from questioning me. I always had to present a perfect image." The participant's accountants illustrate that in most Ghanaian homes, children are not involved in decision making but are expected to accept and adhere to decisions by parents and other adults which may affect future decision making.

Theme 4: Exhibition of vices by parents

The description, *"exhibition of vices by parents"*, signifies situations where parents engage in behaviours that are harmful or detrimental to their children's well-being, such as substance abuse, domestic violence, or criminal activities. The participants of this study reported that their parents exhibited behaviours such as alcoholism and domestic violence. This behaviour resulted in trauma and an internalisation of such behaviours. Hence, individuals who witnessed their relatives engage in alcoholism ended up either imitating those deviant behaviours or refraining from them. For instance, Tracy shared: "My uncle used to drink a lot, and when I turned 8, I started thinking maybe drinking wasn't so bad after

all. So sometimes, when he finished drinking and there was some left in the glass, I would take it and drink it. That's when I started drinking."

Ablah added: "I was sometimes the one sent to buy alcohol for my stepmother—yeah, she was the one drinking. Sometimes she would send my younger brother. I was worried that my younger brother wouldn't learn to drink, but she actually introduced him to alcohol, which made me really angry." Some participants also described dysfunctional household environments that had a lasting negative impact on their upbringing. Candice shared: "I was exposed to certain things that affected me and still affect me today. It's made me insecure with men, which makes it hard for me to trust anyone. I feel like anyone who comes into my life will eventually leave, no matter how much they love me."

Theme 5: Suicidal ideation

The fifth theme also revealed that ACEs contributed to an increase in suicidal ideation. Suicidal ideation includes a range of thoughts, desires, and preoccupations related to death and self-harm. The study suggests that ACEs intensified the participants' inner turmoil, making their traumatic experiences feel unbearable. As a result, death appeared to be the only way they saw fit to cope with their trauma. Consequently, many participants either threatened, contemplated, or attempted suicide. Only three of the 15 participants reported not experiencing suicidal ideation, while the rest had either attempted suicide or had suicidal thoughts.

Lamisi had to say: "Many times, I have had thoughts of ending my life. Even after a man kidnapped me and abused me, like the next day I just did not want to exist on earth. I wanted the earth to swallow me. I really felt bad about my body when I think of someone trying to abuse me. I sometimes feel that I can just die, and everything will go."

This suicidal behaviour by the participants reflects people who feel helpless and hopeless as presented by Lamisi, Yaw, Elorm, Awurasi, and Candice. Candice said, "*I felt everything was not going well with me*". Others also think of suicide as a sign of love for their loved ones. Tracy had this to say: "*I love my mum so I felt like maybe killing myself will do my mum a favour*". Some people like Awurasi think of suicide as a coping strategy for their "*loneliness and anxiety*."

Discussion

This study used the Adlerian theory and the Choice theory as framework to understand how ACEs impact emerging adults' psychosocial well-being in later life. The themes are: (1) Self-image with sub-themes (a)

self-confidence and (b) Parentification; (2) Social connections with sub-themes: (a) Belongingness and (b) Emotional loneliness; (3) Meaning-making with sub-themes: (a) Trust issues and (b) Disregard for a child's viewpoint; (4) Exhibition by parents and (5) Suicide.

The findings of this study are consistent with those of the CDC[5] and Rosecrane[7], who found that early adverse experiences significantly increase the risk of health, psychological, and social challenges, influencing how individuals cope with adversity either in positive or negative ways. Participants in the study had diverse perspectives on their ACEs, which in turn shaped their behaviours in emerging adulthood as they sought to protect themselves from repeating the victimization they experienced during childhood[13][8].

The first theme on self-image had sub-themes that reflected self-confidence and parentification. Emerging adulthood is a period when individuals work to define their self-image, values, and opinions about themselves and others[1]. Adler[23] explained that identity formation is closely linked to feelings of inferiority, which drive individuals to strive for competence and mastery in their chosen roles. In early childhood, feelings of inferiority often stem from dependency, physical limitations, and social comparisons which affect self-confidence.

However, Adler[25] believed that these feelings of inferiority can become a strong motivator for growth, helping individuals develop skills and abilities that foster self-efficacy. Hence the need to help participants with low self-confidence to develop resilience to overcome their inferiorities. The sub-theme on parentification aligns with Carlson et al., 2017 and Tedgård et al.[37] study which found that older children are expected to reassert their authority by acting like role models, dominating younger siblings, and displaying a strong passion for success after the arrival of their younger siblings. Some participants describe themselves as being deprived of happiness and satisfaction because they have to model the perfect habits for their siblings thereby hiding their weaknesses to look like superheroes. This they affirmed is difficult for them to achieve, making them feel unsuccessful in life. Some participants confirmed that they still have some childhood fantasies they did not enjoy because they masked their own needs to play an adult role in the lives of younger siblings and parents[37][38].

The theme of social connections affirms Glasser's[26] concept of the five basic needs, which highlights how people attempt to connect or disconnect from others based on treatment from others. The sub-themes of belongingness and emotional loneliness align with similar findings that have been reported by Haim[39] and Williams[32] who emphasized that ACEs victims have some emotional and social needs

and they rely on their social support to fulfill these needs. Stop Abuse Campaign[40] also confirmed that a higher ACEs score puts victims at risk of developing social and emotional problems. Hence, Credé et al., (2012) emphasised the need for peer social support and support from faculty members to help students adjust emotionally and socially to their campuses. Glasser[26] emphasised that the development of close, caring relationships ensures the effective fulfillment of one's needs to achieve happiness. He stated that genetically, human beings are wired with five basic needs that drive the individual. These needs are survival, love and belonging, power or achievement, freedom or independence, and fun or enjoyment. The Choice theory notes that people choose their behaviours to satisfy unmet needs.

Glasser[26] assumed that all long-lasting psychological problems are relationship problems and that each person must have at least one satisfying relationship. This phenomenon affirms Adler's[23] assumption that early social connection with family, schoolmates, and community fosters social interest and community feeling which may influence how inferiority and superiority play a role in one's life. Healthy development also involves the ability to form meaningful connections with others, share experiences, and contribute to the well-being of the community[41]. Emerging adulthood is often a period when the search for belonging and connection becomes central. Carlson, Watts, et al.[42] found that young adults often face difficulties in building new social networks, forming deep friendships, and establishing intimate relationships, all of which are vital for security and acceptance. Both Adler (1963) and Glasser[26] stressed that individuals who lack social interest or struggle with feelings of isolation are at a higher risk for mental health difficulties, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Emerging adults, therefore, must balance their desire for independence with their need for social connection. Those who succeed in establishing meaningful relationships and contributing to their communities are more likely to experience a sense of belonging and fulfillment[39]. This particular finding regarding how ACEs adversely impede the ability of participants to form and maintain friendships is a testament to the role of ACEs in shaping social skills. Similar findings have been reported in a previous study[43] that showed that experiencing ACEs was detrimental to individuals' capacity to form new relationships and maintain the existing social relations they have. A plausible justification for this assumption is that higher ACE in the early stages of life exacerbates deficiency in social skills which is an essential tool for forming, nurturing, and maintaining friendships and other social relations[44]. Hence, such individuals are likely to struggle with communication and emotional regulation which can, in the long run, retard their ability to maintain and create friendships.

Adler explained that individuals' experiences and the meanings they make out of such experiences describe their subjective reality of their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, convictions, and conclusions in life. Adler used the term style of life or lifestyle to describe the way people perceive the world and act within. This explains the theme of meaning-making with sub-themes: trust issues and disregard for a child's viewpoint. Adler[25] argued that the drive for significance is a primary motivator in human development. From an early age, individuals seek to feel competent, valuable, and capable of making a meaningful impact on the world. In emerging adulthood, this drive often prompts individuals to question their life purpose, societal role, and contribution to others' well-being[45]. Some female participants who have experienced sexual abuse in childhood cited some challenges they have been encountering in their intimate relationships. They cited issues of being clingy, nagging, and having trust issues which have caused them to be in and out of many relationships. The Choice theory notes that people choose their behaviours to satisfy unmet needs. Any challenge with the need for love and belonging may affect trust building. Adlerian emphasizes the importance of purposeful action, especially the pursuit of goals aligned with one's values and the greater good. Those who find meaning in their lives and contribute to the common good are more likely to experience fulfillment and life satisfaction[32]. This affirms the sub-theme of disregard for a child's viewpoint. Glasser's[27] need for survival is what pushes individuals to take certain actions in life like the participants trying to connect to meet unmet needs or facing life with the approach and avoidance behaviour. People will like to have the freedom to make choices for themselves and others. When this power is taken from individuals, they feel they do not have the power to achieve certain things and their self-worth is questioned.

The fourth theme on exhibition by parents is another area that influences lifestyle and goal orientation. The participants reported witnessing certain characteristics of parents and other adults within their society which either positively or negatively influenced their behaviour. According to Adler, people are seen as adopting a proactive approach to their social environment[24]. It has been proven that children who witnessed family members going through some traumatic experiences were negatively affected[4] [7]. Some participants reported that witnessing the abuse and humiliation that their mothers went through has taught them to cherish and respect women. This aligns with Adler's assumption that people form guiding self-idle actions based on their experiences which serve as road maps to guide their lives to meet societal norms for acceptance. This finding is in relation to Zetino et al.[46] and Yu et al.[47] who emphasised that childhood abuse and neglect impact a person's later life. Beckerman et al.[48] also confirmed that witnessing abuse of others in childhood can influence later life.

Twelve out of the fifteen participants admitted to either having suicidal ideations or having attempted suicide at a point in their lives. All participants with suicidal ideas felt it would be a means to end their pain and also save their loved ones from suffering because of them. These attitudes by some participants confirm Adler's[25] private logic whereby the participants believe their death will relieve them of their pains and also the discomfort of their loved ones who seem to be in distress because of their existence. These thoughts by some participants are just their own thoughts which do not mean that their loved ones did not want them to be alive. This confirms Watts'[49] assumption that pursuing perfection entails enhancing one's abilities for the benefit of others as well as for oneself. The misery occurs when the need for recognition turns into criticism, threatening and nagging with the intent of guiding them to achieve their needs by parents or others within the society. These external controls may result in conflict, frustration, and disconnected relationships, thereby, causing affected individuals to be unhappy, leading to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety[50].

Emerging adulthood, therefore, a time when individuals navigate the balance between personal achievement and societal contribution. Those who manage to integrate their personal goals with broader societal needs often experience greater purpose and fulfillment[39]. Though emerging adults may encounter feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and failure during this transition, both Adler and Glasser encourage a growth mindset; one that focuses on learning from mistakes and building on past experiences. Overcoming life's challenges becomes a key element in developing a healthy and resilient identity.

Conclusion

Emerging adulthood is a transformative period in which young adults strive to define their identity, establish a sense of belonging, and pursue meaningful goals. Adler's focus on overcoming inferiority, developing social interest, and finding purpose provides a powerful framework for understanding the emotional and psychological tasks that young adults face. Glasser emphasizes embracing certain connecting principles to help emerging adults navigate the problems in this life stage with resilience, self-awareness, and a sense of social responsibility. This is to help develop fulfillment and purpose as they move into full adulthood.

Implications of the study

The study contributes to the literature on the effects of ACEs on mental health and well-being, particularly in the context of emerging adults. The study findings suggest that individuals, who experience emotional deprivation, neglect, and criticism may struggle with fulfilling their basic needs. The importance of close, caring relationships in fulfilling human needs is highlighted. There is a need for social support and peer support in helping individuals cope with ACEs to ensure psychosocial well-being.

Recommendation

From the findings, it is clear that ACEs influence a person's thoughts, feelings, and judgment in many forms. It is recommended that affected individuals need their family and society to understand and help them build trust and redefine their identity to make new meanings in life. It is, therefore, important for mental health professionals to teach these individuals some behavioural changes including building resilience for them to heal from their past and build self-worth.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was for the participants to open up on their ACEs. The interviewer used her counselling knowledge and skills to build rapport with the participants and assure them of confidentiality. This helped the participants to build trust and confidence in the interviewer to open up on certain issues they never shared with anyone. Again, the current study used individual interviews to collect data from the participants, which means the subjective views of the participants cannot be verified which is in line with Felitti's[31] limitation in his study. As reported, ACEs were based on participants' memory which is subject to errors related to recalling, perceived expectations, and prejudice. The hermeneutic phenomenological design chosen for this study helped to limit some of these errors through the meanings and insights evolving through dialogue between the researcher, participants, data, and literature.

Statements and Declarations

Acknowledgments

Citation diversity statement

In the desire to enhance diversity in research on emerging adults' ACEs and psychosocial well-being, I was intentional about providing literature from a cross-cultural worldview. Since ACE is a global issue, the literature combined studies from Ghana and globally, emphasizing the diverse representation of the phenomenon. All citations used in the study have been appropriately referenced, and I have given credit to those who created the fundamentals that I am building upon.

Conflicts of interest

I, the author, have no potential conflict of interest to report.

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Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.