

Title: The effects of childhood deprivation on the adult brain: Results from a natural experiment

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Abstract: Adults with mental health and personality functioning difficulties often report having experienced social adversity in childhood. However, moving from identifying a correlation between early environmental exposures and later psychological difficulties to inferring that the former causes the later, is problematic. This is because research studies often rely on retrospective data from self-selected samples where genetic and environmental risks are confounded. In this talk I will present data from the young adult follow-up of English and Romanian Adoptees (ERA) that gets over some of these problems. We have spent the last 25 years studying the developmental outcomes of children who spent the early years of their lives in the harshly depriving Romanian institutions that existed during the last years of the communist regime in the late 1980s before being adopted as infants and young children by UK families. The presentation will focus, in particular, on findings from the recently completed brain imaging arm of the study and report on alterations in brain structure and its relation to deprivation-related deficits in IQ and ADHD. The results highlight the power of early time-limited adversity to override subsequent positive experiences to determine brain structure across the life span.