

## **The effects of adverse childhood experiences of social work students on notions of well-being: insights for education and practice**

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### **Abstract**

This case study focused on the effects of adverse childhood experiences on undergraduate social work students. The notion of subjective well-being (SWB) was used to frame the findings. The study used 20 reflexive assignments of third year social work students and 10 student interviews in a selected university in South Africa. Three themes centred on the effects of ACEs reflecting students' inner turmoil and externalising behaviours. These effects contrasted with the components of SWB. The implication is that many social work students attend social work classes while still enduring the effects of ACEs. This would imply the possibility that social work students are being trained to intervene in issues evocative of personal experiences which may pose challenges for requisite objectivity. The findings show the need to explore the appropriate social work curriculum, to meet the learning needs of an emerging student profile.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Positive childhood attachment is essential for positive adult adjustment (Hinnen, Sanderman and Sprangers, 2009). People assimilate childhood experiences that revolve around their connections with primary caregivers and give rise to emotional and perceptual images (mental models) which inform their “expectations, perceptions and behaviours throughout life” (Hinnen et al., 2009:11). These images represent the self in association with others and inform the internal working model which is assumed to be the means through which the effects of childhood experiences persist into adulthood. However, because adversity in life is unavoidable, many people experience serious difficulties that result in making them vulnerable to detrimental psycho-social and physical effects (Cohen, Ferguson, Harms, Pooley and Tomlinson, 2011). Research has confirmed a strong relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and mental health difficulties in later life (Jovanovic, Blanding, Norrholm, Duncan, Bradley and Ressler, 2009).

According to Felitti and Anda, ACEs include any of the conditions in the family (or household) before the age of 18 years (Brown, Anda, Felitti, Edwards, Malarcher, Croft and Giles, 2010). The main components of ACEs are: frequent child abuse, ineffectual child caregivers, poor family well-being, and unfavourable social environment (Dykes, 2014, 2012; Brown et al., 2010). ACEs can be understood to encompass harmful incidents during childhood which are perceived by a person as negative or traumatising based on the severity



































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