Childhood Trauma and Hippocampal and Amygdalalar Volumes in First-Episode Psychosis

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Introduction
A history of traumatic events, childhood abuse in particular, is common in psychosis populations.1,2 The Traumagenic Neurodevelopmental (TN) model of psychosis3 hypothesizes that abnormal neurodevelopmental processes can originate in traumatic events in childhood. It has been theorized that these traumatic events may lead to biological changes such as a pathological alteration in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis4 and to the high responsivity to stress observed in a sizeable percentage of people with schizophrenia. The model is based upon research demonstrating a similar profile of neurological and biochemical abnormalities in individuals with schizophrenia and in those exposed to childhood abuse.3 Indeed, a recent test of the TN model indicates greater HPA axis dysregulation, as measured by cortisol levels, in individuals with a diagnosis of schizophrenia abused as children (especially those emotionally abused) as compared with their nonabused counterparts.5

A number of imaging studies have identified similar brain abnormalities in traumatized individuals with a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).6 Dissociative Identity Disorder,7 Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD),8 and Major Depression9 to those observed in psychosis. This suggests that trauma may have specific effects on the brain. There is also evidence to suggest that early life stressors, such as childhood abuse and neglect, can result in a reduction in the volume of the hippocampus, which is a prominent substrate for glucocorticoid-mediated negative feedback on HPA activity and that this reduction is observable in adulthood.10,11 A large body of research has demonstrated hippocampal volume reductions in schizophrenia,12–14 although some studies are contradictory.15 It is significant, from a neurodevelopmental perspective, that reductions in hippocampal volume have been observed in first-episode schizophrenia12,16 and in

Methods
The study employed an observational retrospective design. Twenty-one individuals, who had previously undergone magnetic resonance imaging procedures as part of the longitudinal Northern Ireland First-Episode Psychosis Study, completed measures assessing traumatic experiences and were included in the analysis. Data were subject to correlation analyses (r and rpb). Potential confounding variables (age at FEP and delay to scan from recruitment) were selected a priori for inclusion in multiple regression analyses.

Results: There was a high prevalence of lifetime (95%) and childhood (76%) trauma in the sample. The experience of childhood trauma was a significant predictor of left hippocampal volume, although age at FEP also significantly contributed to this model. There was no significant association between predictor variables and right hippocampal volume. The experience of childhood trauma was a significant predictor of right and total amygdalar volumes and the hippocampal/amygdalar complex volume as a whole. Conclusions: The findings indicate that childhood trauma is associated with neuroanatomical measures in FEP. Future research controlling for childhood traumatic experiences may contribute to explaining brain morphology in people with psychosis.

Key words: psychosis/trauma/hippocampus/amygdala

Objective: A history of childhood trauma is common in individuals who later develop psychosis. Similar neuroanatomical abnormalities are observed in people who have been exposed to childhood trauma and people with psychosis. However, the relationship between childhood trauma and such abnormalities in psychosis has not been investigated. This study aimed to explore the association between the experience of childhood trauma and hippocampal and amygdalar volumes in a first-episode psychosis (FEP) population.

Methods: The study employed an observational retrospective design. Twenty-one individuals, who had previously undergone magnetic resonance imaging procedures as part of the longitudinal Northern Ireland First-Episode Psychosis Study, completed measures assessing traumatic experiences and were included in the analysis. Data were subject to correlation analyses (r and rpb). Potential confounding variables (age at FEP and delay to scan from recruitment) were selected a priori for inclusion in multiple regression analyses.

Results: There was a high prevalence of lifetime (95%) and childhood (76%) trauma in the sample. The experience of childhood trauma was a significant predictor of left hippocampal volume, although age at FEP also significantly contributed to this model. There was no significant association between predictor variables and right hippocampal volume. The experience of childhood trauma was a significant predictor of right and total amygdalar volumes and the hippocampal/amygdalar complex volume as a whole. Conclusions: The findings indicate that childhood trauma is associated with neuroanatomical measures in FEP. Future research controlling for childhood traumatic experiences may contribute to explaining brain morphology in people with psychosis.

Key words: psychosis/trauma/hippocampus/amygdala

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ultrahigh risk (UHR) groups\textsuperscript{17} because they cannot be explained as a consequence of medication effects or disease chronicity. Read et al\textsuperscript{1} have therefore posited that such structural abnormalities observed in schizophrenia could in fact be caused by childhood trauma. There is also indirect behavioral evidence of greater temporal/hippocampal dysfunction associated with childhood trauma in this population: explicit verbal memory impairments have been reported to be greater in individuals with chronic schizophrenia who have a significant trauma history.\textsuperscript{18}

It has also been suggested that a “critical period” exists for the normative development of an emotional regulatory system that is able to appropriately differentiate threatening from nonthreatening environmental stimuli and that trauma exposure during development may impact function of the HPA axis through effects at the level of the amygdala.\textsuperscript{4} While there is evidence of increased limbic functional sensitivity in individuals who have experienced childhood trauma,\textsuperscript{4,10,11} results regarding amygdalar volumes in traumatized and psychotic groups lack consensus. In people who have experienced childhood abuse, some studies report minor volume reductions,\textsuperscript{8} whereas others report significant amygdalar size reductions.\textsuperscript{19,20} Meta-analyses of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) findings in schizophrenia provide evidence of amygdalar reductions,\textsuperscript{21} but these conflict with more recent research.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite evidence indicating a high prevalence of childhood maltreatment in psychotic populations and neurobiological consequences of such stress, morphometric studies in psychosis have neither reported nor controlled for a history of childhood trauma, opting instead to highlight possible etiological explanations that are vague or reflect biological reductionism. The present study assessed the experience of childhood maltreatment and its association with hippocampal and amygdalar volumes in a subsample of individuals who participated in the longitudinal Northern Ireland First-Episode Psychosis (NIFEPS) study.\textsuperscript{22} To our knowledge, this is the only study that has examined the association between childhood trauma and brain morphology in a psychosis sample to date. We hypothesized that the experience of such trauma would significantly predict hippocampal and amygdalar volumes at illness onset in these patients.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from the NIFEPS\textsuperscript{22} which recruited cases of first-episode psychosis (FEP) from psychiatric services between January 2004 and December 2004 in the Northern and Belfast Health and Social Care Catchment Areas in Northern Ireland (population: 782,979). From these referrals, 90 participants consented to and underwent MRI scanning procedures. Exclusion criteria were evidence of psychosis resulting from an organic etiology, history of a traumatic brain injury or neurodegenerative disorder, a previous episode of psychosis, evidence of a learning disability, or a contraindication for an MRI (eg, metal in the body around the scan area).

The 90-scanned participants satisfied International Classification of Diseases (10th edition: ICD-10)\textsuperscript{23} criteria for schizophrenia/schizoaffective disorder (n = 25), bipolar disorder/mania (n = 24), and psychotic depression (n = 11), while the remainder were “other psychotic disorders” (n = 30).

All available participants with an MRI (from NIFEPS) were invited to take part in the current study through their keyworkers. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from a local research ethics committee regulated by a statutory research governance framework. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after they had received a complete description of the study. Participants were also excluded if they were unable to participate due to current mental state.

Twenty-seven participants (30%) were lost to follow-up due to not being contactable, relocation, or death. Sixty-three (70%) participants were contacted. Of these, 41 (19 males [46%] and 22 females [54%]) declined to participate. The 21 individuals who participated satisfied ICD-10 criteria for schizophrenia (n = 10), bipolar disorder/mania (n = 3), psychotic depression (n = 2), and “other psychotic diagnoses” (n = 6). One further individual was interviewed but excluded from statistical analysis as they were judged to be an extreme outlier based on their volumetric measurements.

Characteristics for participants are shown in table 1. Those interviewed were relatively similar in respect of age, gender, and gross brain volumes to those who declined to participate (age at first episode [t = 0.67, df = 60, P = .51], gender [X\(^2\) (1) = 0.65 P = .42], white matter [WM] [t = 1.2, df = 60, P = .24], gray matter [GM] [t = 0.9, df = 60, P = .37], and cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) [t = 0.89, df = 60, P = .38]). People who declined interview were less likely to have a diagnosis of schizophrenia but this did not reach significance (Declined Interview—SCZ/Other = 11/30; X\(^2\) (1) = 2.68, P = .1).

**Materials**

**Symptom Measures.** At both the time of MRI scan and administration of trauma measures, depression was measured using the “Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)”\textsuperscript{24} and psychotic symptoms were assessed using the “Positive and Negative Symptom Scale (PANSS).”\textsuperscript{25} These measures have good psychometric properties.\textsuperscript{26,27} In addition, we reported on an “excitement-mania” factor from the PANSS\textsuperscript{28} (see table 1). At follow-up, the “Dissociative Experiences Scale II” (DES II)\textsuperscript{29} was employed to assess for current symptoms of dissociation. This measure has high levels of reliability and validity.\textsuperscript{29}

**Trauma Measures.** “The Traumatic Experiences Checklist” (TEC)\textsuperscript{30} was administered to assess traumatic...
At first episode/time of scan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender (female; %)</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>(57%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age at first episode (mean y; SD; range)</td>
<td>31.86</td>
<td>10.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delay to MRI scan from initial presentation to services (mean wk; SD; range)</td>
<td>52.07</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication at scan (olanzapine/risperidone/quetiapine/aripiprazole/clozapine/none)</td>
<td>7/6/4/1/1/2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANSS positive symptoms at first presentation (mean; SD)</td>
<td>14.57</td>
<td>4.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANSS negative symptoms at first presentation (mean; SD)</td>
<td>12.43</td>
<td>6.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANSS general symptoms at first presentation (mean; SD)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANSS excitement-mania factor at first presentation (mean; SD)</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDI symptoms at first presentation (mean; SD)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol (DSM IV dependence/use/abstention/never used)</td>
<td>2/4/11/2/2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At trauma interview

| Currently employed (yes; %) | 8 | (38.1%) |
| Age (mean years; SD; range) | 39.52 | 11.42 | 26–64 |
| PANSS positive symptoms (mean; SD) | 11.81 | 4.88 | 7–25 |
| PANSS negative symptoms (mean; SD) | 14.33 | 5.38 | 7–27 |
| PANSS general symptoms (mean; SD) | 32.71 | 12.4 | 16–63 |
| PANSS excitement-mania factor (mean; SD) | 5.25 | 1.59 | 4–10 |
| Beck depression symptoms (mean; SD) | 17.5 | 14.71 | 0–55 |
| Dissociation symptoms | 19.38 | 14 |
| Number of hospital admissions | 2.43 | 2.18 | 0–8 |
| Psychological therapy (any reason; yes) | 9 | (42.9%) |
| Alcohol units (0/1–10 per wk; %) | 7/14 | (33.3/66.6%) |

Note: PANSS, Positive and Negative Symptoms Scale; BDI, Beck Depression Inventory; MRI, magnetic resonance imaging; DSM-IV, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition.

Parcellation of the Hippocampus and Amygdala

Manual drawing of the 2 structures involved outlining the periphery of the ROI, delineated separately for the left and right hemispheres from the T1-weighted, spatially normalized coronal images lying on a plane perpendicular to the hippocampus major axis. This process was performed in Analyze 7.5 Imaging Software (Biomedical Imaging Resource, Mayo Clinic). All ROIs were drawn by one experienced researcher (F.B.) who was blinded to group membership. A random subset of 5 participants had their structures redrawn (both right and left hippocampi and amygdala) to test consistency of parcellation. The correlation coefficients for experiences. The TEC is a 33-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure 29 types of potential trauma and the perceived impact of these events. The TEC yields a childhood trauma composite score, comprising various domains of trauma (eg, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse. Childhood trauma is defined as "trauma occurring before the age of 18 y."). It has been shown to have good levels of reliability and validity.

"The Post-Traumatic Diagnostic Scale" is a 49-item self-report instrument and is designed to aid in the detection and diagnosis of PTSD. It was administered twice to assess for PTSD in relation to the most significant traumatic experiences in childhood and again in adulthood. This measure has been shown to have high levels of test-retest reliability and of validity.

The experience and impact of civil conflict was assessed using the "Troubles Related Experiences Questionnaire". This is a 30-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess exposure to, and perceived impact of, civil conflict in Northern Ireland in child and adulthood. Preliminary research suggests high internal reliability.
hippocampus and amygdala volumes were 0.93 and 0.89, respectively. Anatomic guidelines for the hippocampus were based on a standard neuroanatomical atlas. The hippocampal regions measured included the CA1 to CA4 fields of the cornu ammonis, dentate gyrus, the subiculum, the alveus, and the fimbria. Parahippocampal gyrus, tail of the caudate, amygdala, CSF around the hippocampus, and the fornix were excluded. Tracing of the hippocampus started caudally anteriorly in the section where the crura of the fornices depart from the lateral wall of the lateral ventricles and ended rostrally where the hippocampus disappears below the amygdala.

Anatomic guidelines for the delineation of the amygdala were taken after Brierley. The anterior border was identified where the lateral sulcus closed to form the entorhinal sulcus. The posterior border excluded the tail of the caudate nucleus, the globus pallidus and putamen, and lateral geniculate body. In cases where the border of the putamen could not be defined clearly, only the medial halves of the structures in the roof were included inside the amygdala boundary. The medial border was drawn to include uncus, but the inferior entorhinal cortex to the uncal notch was excluded. The lateral border was defined by the inferior horn of lateral ventricle or adjacent WM. The superior border was drawn: (1) anteriorly, as a straight line laterally from entorhinal sulcus to the fundus of the inferior portion of the circular sulcus of insula; (2) posteriorly, as a straight line laterally from the superolateral aspect of the optic tract to the fundus of the circular sulcus of insula. Finally, the inferior border was defined by the uncal recess of the lateral ventricle.

Design and Statistical Analyses

This observational study employed a retrospective correlational design. Examination of the MRI data revealed one participant who was judged to be an outlier by distance (standard residual = 2.54) and by influence (Cook's distance = 2.51) and was excluded from subsequent analyses. The total childhood trauma composite score from the TEC, assessing severity of childhood trauma, was not normally distributed and hence, simplified to a Yes/No binary variable “Experience of Childhood Trauma” (no childhood trauma group [n = 5; TEC score = 0]; childhood trauma group [n = 16; TEC median score = 10 IQR = 3–33.5]) for the purposes of a priori statistical testing using parametric methods. Associations between variables were tested using Pearson’s parametric correlations (r and rpb). A series of regression analyses were then conducted to determine if 3 predictor variables of theoretical interest (experience of childhood trauma, age at first episode of psychosis, delay to scan) predicted neuroanatomical volumes. “Age at first episode” was added as a covariate as onset of psychosis most commonly occurs in late adolescence/early adulthood, an observation that is often thought to be a reflection of abnormal neurodevelopmental processes. “Delay to scan” was included primarily as a proxy measure for duration of exposure to antipsychotic medication as all participants were commenced on antipsychotics shortly after first presentation to psychiatric services.

Results

Traumatic Experiences

Twenty participants (95%) reported experiencing one or more traumatic life events (mean = 7, SD = 4.7, range 0–16). Sixteen participants (76%) reported experiencing “childhood trauma” ie, trauma occurring prior to 18 years, and 5 participants did not (24%). Of those reporting childhood trauma, 5 (31.25%) reported traumatic experiences to have first occurred between age 0–6 years (all reporting further childhood trauma subsequent to this), 10 (62.5%) between 7 and 12 years (7 reporting further childhood trauma between 13 and 18 y), and 1 (6.25%) between 13 and 18 years. There was little evidence in this small sample that a first trauma experienced earlier (0–6 y) rather than later influenced amygdalar or hippocampal volumes in people with a childhood trauma history, hence this variable was not considered further in these analyses. Fisher’s Exact Test indicated that rates of childhood trauma did not significantly differ between participants with a diagnosis of schizophrenia vs ‘other’ diagnoses (P = 0.31; trauma/no trauma: SCZ n = 9/1; Other 7/4). The sample characteristics in respect of trauma domains (frequencies of events), as assessed by the TEC, are shown in table 2.

In respect of exposure to conflict related to civil conflict, 17 (85%) participants reported experiencing

<p>| Table 2. Frequencies of Participants Who Experienced Different Childhood Traumas (TEC) |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range (y)</th>
<th>Emotional Neglect (%)</th>
<th>Emotional Abuse (%)</th>
<th>Bodily Threat (%)</th>
<th>Sexual Harassment (No Physical Contact) (%)</th>
<th>Sexual Abuse (Physical Contact) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–18</td>
<td>11 (52)</td>
<td>12 (57)</td>
<td>9 (42)</td>
<td>4 (19)</td>
<td>5 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–6</td>
<td>4 (19)</td>
<td>3 (14)</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–12</td>
<td>8 (38)</td>
<td>11 (52)</td>
<td>6 (29)</td>
<td>2 (9)</td>
<td>3 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13–18</td>
<td>7 (33)</td>
<td>8 (38)</td>
<td>8 (38)</td>
<td>4 (19)</td>
<td>5 (24)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: TEC, Traumatic Experiences Checklist
exposure as an adult and 18 (90%) as a child. A high prevalence of trauma was apparent; however, 5 participants (24%) met the criteria for PTSD related to traumatic event that occurred in childhood, only 2 participants (10%) met the criteria for PTSD related to traumatic events that occurred in adulthood, and only 1 participant met the criteria for PTSD related to both. Nine (43%) participants’ scores on the DES-II fell with the ‘high range’, suggesting significant dissociative experiences within the sample.

Table 3. Brain Volumes for Regions of Interest in Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brain Region</th>
<th>Mean Volume</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Z Scoresa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grey matter cm³</td>
<td>680.61</td>
<td>59.14</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White matter cm³</td>
<td>474.95</td>
<td>47.48</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) cm³</td>
<td>361.04</td>
<td>43.15</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right hippocampus mm³</td>
<td>2845.28</td>
<td>336.22</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left hippocampus mm³</td>
<td>2788.6</td>
<td>359.99</td>
<td>-0.81*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total hippocampus mm³</td>
<td>5632.09</td>
<td>635.01</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right amygdala mm³</td>
<td>2320.02</td>
<td>341.54</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left amygdala mm³</td>
<td>2196.08</td>
<td>357.73</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amygdala mm³</td>
<td>4516.10</td>
<td>652.34</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hippocampus/amygdala total mm³</td>
<td>10148.19</td>
<td>1167.86</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aZ Scores derived to contextualize participants results using data from controls (n = 21) from Northern Ireland First-Episode Psychosis Study, selected to individually match study participants for both sex and age. Controls were scanned concurrently and neuroanatomical data were generated contemporaneously, using identical methods to those described herein.

*Significant reduction, P < .05.

Hippocampus. The model for total hippocampus volume approached, but did not achieve, significance, and accounted for 22.5% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .225$; $df (3, 17)$; $F = 2.933$; $P = .063$; predictors—experience of childhood trauma $\beta = -.315$; age at first episode $\beta = -.445$; delay to scan $\beta = -.033$). The model for the right hippocampus was not significant (adjusted $R^2 = -.012$; $df (3, 17)$; $F = 0.919$; $P = .453$; predictors—experience of childhood trauma $\beta = -.164$; age at first episode $\beta = -.362$; delay to scan $\beta = -.153$). The regression model for the left hippocampus was however significant, accounting for 45.1% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .451$; $df (3, 17)$; $F = 6.468$; $P = .004$). The 2 significant variables within the model were the experience of childhood trauma ($\beta = -.402$, $P = .028$) and age at first episode ($\beta = .446$, $P = .027$). Delay to scan was not significant in this model ($\beta = .2$).

Amygdala. The regression model for total amygdala volume was significant, accounting for 27.3% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .273$; $df (3, 17)$; $F = 3.5$; $P = .038$). The only significant variable within the model was the experience of childhood trauma ($\beta = -.5$, $P = .019$; age at first episode $\beta = .256$; delay to scan $\beta = .094$). The regression model for right amygdala volume was significant, accounting for 28.4% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .284$; $df (3, 17)$; $F = 3.639$; $P = .034$). The significant variable within the model was the experience of childhood trauma ($\beta = -.419$, $P = .042$; age at first episode $\beta = -.358$; delay to scan $\beta = .11$). The regression model for left amygdala volume approached, but did not achieve, significance, and accounted for 18.8% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .188$; $df (3, 17)$; $F = 2.545$; $P = .09$). The significant variable within the model was the experience of childhood trauma ($\beta = -.512$, $P = .022$; age at first episode $\beta = .124$; delay to scan $\beta = .066$).

The relationships between childhood trauma composite scores from the TEC (ranked by severity) and neuroanatomical variables were also examined using simple, nonparametric correlations (Spearman’s Rho): all findings were upheld in these secondary analyses.

Regression Analyses

Hippocampus/Amygdala Complex Total Volume. Using the enter method, the regression model for the hippocampus/amygdala complex volume was significant, accounting for 31.9% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .319$; $df (3, 17)$; $F = 4.128$, $P = .023$). The significant variable within the model was the experience of childhood trauma ($\beta = -.451$, $P = .027$; age at first episode $\beta = .385$; delay to scan $\beta = .07$).

Trauma and Gross Brain Regions

The volumetric means of all ROIs are shown in table 3. The experience of childhood trauma was not significantly associated with any gross volumetric regions including: total GM ($r_{pb} = .161$, $P = .486$), total WM ($r_{pb} = -.003$, $P = .99$), total CSF ($r_{pb} = -.143$, $P = .537$), and intracranial volume ($r_{pb} = .026$, $P = .909$).

Trauma and Symptomatology

Post hoc analyses between childhood trauma experience and symptomatology were conducted to determine whether there was evidence of interrelationships between the experience of childhood trauma, severity of patients’ illness, and volumetric measures. They were primarily conducted to check whether illness severity in the sample could be a potential confounding factor in these analyses. Given the primary purpose of these secondary analyses was conservative (ie, search for confounds), the large number of correlations being conducted and the small sample size, effect sizes of $r > .35$ were considered further.

Results indicated that there were no relationships of note (all $r_{pb} < .35$) between the experience of childhood trauma and symptomatology.
findings represent evidence that the neuroanatomical
with a high prevalence of childhood trauma. Hence, the
in the amygdala, would be observable in those cohorts
in psychosis samples with a negligible history of child-
lar volume enlargement would most likely be observed
It would be hypothesized from these data that amygda-
alation in these patients relative to healthy controls.
need to control for brain size was utilized.
This study is limited by a number of factors. The small
sample size reduces the statistical power of the study but
is however comparable to other FEP MRI studies. In
addition, from the observations reported here, while
associations can be determined, causality cannot be
inferred.
A number of additional factors that were not con-
trolled for in the analyses may also play an important
role in brain morphology in psychosis. Diagnostic
category may be important as research suggests that while
the amygdala may facilitate hippocampal-dependant mem-
ory processes in BPD, it may impair these same processes
in schizophrenia. Younger age of traumatic experience
may also be important because the consequences of
trauma appear more detrimental at an earlier stage of
brain development. We examined this variable in a ru-
dimentary way (an early versus later first childhood

Discussion

To our knowledge, this study represents the first investi-
gation of childhood trauma and brain morphology in
psychosis. The use of a FEP group largely eliminates po-
tential study confounders such as disease chronicity and
the effects of long-term antipsychotic medication, which
may affect brain morphology. Moreover, a recent inno-
vation in MRI modulation techniques that removes the
need to control for brain size was utilized.

The findings support our hypothesized association
between the experience of childhood trauma and de-
creased hippocampal volume, particularly left hippo-
campal volume. Decreased right, left, and total
amygdala volumes were also associated with the experi-
ence of childhood traumatic experiences against a back-
ground of minimal evidence of amygdalar volume
alteration in these patients relative to healthy controls.
It would be hypothesized from these data that amygdal-
ary volume enlargement would most likely be observed
in psychosis samples with a negligible history of child-
hood trauma, while no change, or volumetric reductions
in the amygdala, would be observable in those cohorts
with a high prevalence of childhood trauma. Hence, the
findings represent evidence that the neuroanatomical
abnormalities observed in some psychosis studies
may, in part, be due to the uncontrolled inclusion of
individuals with a history of childhood trauma. More-
over, traumatic experiences in childhood may play an
important role in brain morphology in FEP, relatively
independent of psychotic symptoms.

The literature is replete with research indicating asso-
ciations between trauma and neuroanatomical variables,
irrespective of diagnosis. A meta-analysis has confirmed
that a diagnosis of PTSD is associated with decreased
hippocampal and left amygdalar volumes, while also re-
vealing a similar influence of trauma in the absence of
PTSD. In a BPD sample, volume differences between
controls and those with BPD were only found when the
BPD group also had a history of childhood abuse. Smaller
hippocampal volumes have been observed in
adult women with major depressive disorder with a his-
tory of childhood abuse.

Our results, when considered with an earlier neurocog-
nitive article, suggest that specific neurocognitive defi-
cits and neuroanatomical abnormalities observed in
psychosis may at least in part be a consequence of child-
hood trauma. Difficulties arise when comparing the stud-
ies because of variations in illness trajectory and
diagnostic groups as the previous neurocognitive articles
predominantly focus on samples with chronic difficulties.
However, the combined findings, irrespective of study
variations, strengthen the proposition that childhood
trauma is exerting an effect.

If reported structural abnormalities are sometimes
a product of the experience of early childhood trauma
and the inclusion of traumatized individuals in study
samples, then we would expect to find some similar struc-
tural abnormalities in UHR and FEP groups. While one
study suggests that structural changes occur only after
the onset of psychotic symptoms, this is not supported
by other research reporting hippocampal reductions in
a UHR and first-episode groups as compared with con-
trls.

This study is limited by a number of factors. The small
sample size reduces the statistical power of the study but
is however comparable to other FEP MRI studies. In
addition, from the observations reported here, while
associations can be determined, causality cannot be
inferred.

A number of additional factors that were not con-
trolled for in the analyses may also play an important
role in brain morphology in psychosis. Diagnostic
category may be important as research suggests that while
the amygdala may facilitate hippocampal-dependant mem-
ory processes in BPD, it may impair these same processes
in schizophrenia. Younger age of traumatic experience
may also be important because the consequences of
trauma appear more detrimental at an earlier stage of
brain development. We examined this variable in a ru-
dimentary way (an early versus later first childhood

Childhood Trauma and Hippocampal and Amygdalar Volumes
trauma experience) in people who had experienced childhood trauma but did not find evidence to support this conclusion. There are numerous potential reasons for this however, eg, a small sample size/minimal statistical power as well as the potential for other characteristics of those sampled exerting a more pervasive effect on neuroanatomical variables (problematically, ICV differed between these groups and had to be controlled for).

Factors that may have been considered confounds in these analyses (eg, age of onset; psychosis severity) may also be influenced by trauma history and both drug abuse and depression are likely to have a complex relationship with trauma and neuroanatomical variables in psychosis groups. Moreover, while antipsychotic medication effects were deemed to be limited, we did not control for antidepressant treatments, the prescription of which may have predated the onset of psychosis, which may have been found to block the effects of stress and/or promote neurogenesis.40

The retrospective design is also a limitation. The trauma measures were administered a few years following the MRI scanning procedures and rely on the accurate self-report of trauma. Participants may have underestimated their experience of trauma due to it being repressed, dissociated, or forgotten or may not have been prepared to disclose their experiences due to feeling ashamed or being mistrustful of the researcher and/or the interview situation. Conversely, overreporting may have occurred, possibly as a by-product of the participants’ mental state. However, the trauma measures utilized in this research have excellent psychometric properties, indicating high test-retest reliability and thus stability over time.32 Several studies have reported fair to moderate test-retest reliability for trauma measures in populations with severe mental illnesses, including one in the same geographical region as this study.41

Moreover, recent research indicates that self-reported histories of adversity in a psychosis population were both reliable and valid when they were measured over time (7-year period) and compared with other sources of data (eg, case notes) and also were not associated with current severity of psychotic symptoms.42

Irrespective of the study limitations, there are a number of important implications. This study contributes to current theorizing by providing support for the TN model of psychosis.1 The high prevalence of trauma within the sample provides further evidence for the implementation of new policy guidelines in the United Kingdom, which stipulate that trauma enquiries by trained mental health professionals should form a part of all routine psychiatric assessments (National Health Service Confederation).1 The results further suggest that trauma-focused interventions for traumatized individuals with psychosis may be an important avenue for intervention. Indeed, Read et al1 note that “the fact that early trauma affects the brain does not imply that those brain changes are irreversible.”

This study provides evidence that childhood trauma is a potentially important explanatory variable for neuroanatomical observations in FEP. However, many questions remain regarding the exact nature of the relationship. The use of longitudinal studies with UHR and traumatized groups offers a promising method of disentangling the conflicting morphometric findings in psychosis populations.

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