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Negative Life Events, Social Support, and Positive Future Identity

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Abstract

Adolescents can face many challenges including Negative Life Events (sometimes called Adverse Childhood Experiences) such as experiencing the death of a family member or being diagnosed with a chronic illness. Previous studies have shown that negative life events (NLEs) can lead to higher levels of anxiety for adolescents, but social support can buffer these symptoms. It is also known that experiencing NLEs may be associated with a less positive sense of identity, which could have long-term impacts. We conducted a secondary data analysis with data from the Integrated Community Engagement (ICE) project in West Virginia which included adolescent participants (n=17,618; aged 11-18) attending public school. We tested an interaction effect using a Multiple Regression model to understand whether social support could potentially buffer the impact of NLEs on positive future identity. Results of the final model, after controlling for age, gender, and race, were significant ($F(69,510) = 947.25, p < .01; R^2 = 0.37$). The interaction term of NLEs and social support was significant (Beta= -0.63). Our findings indicate that social support may buffer the impact of NLEs on identity. With this, schools may want to focus on implementing stronger support systems for students who experience negative life events.

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Is the Relationship between the Number of Negative Life Events and Identity attenuated by Social Support?

BACKGROUND

Adolescence is a critical developmental time period that can have long-term impacts on people's lives; both negatively and positively. Unfortunately, we know that negative things, such as school expulsion, divorce, or the death of someone close, can happen children while they grow up. It has been previously established that these "Negative Life Events" can have a cumulative effect on physical and mental health outcomes. We were curious about the positive health outcome of "Future Self Identity" because having a strong sense of your future self can be protective and has been linked to academic achievement and better mental health outcomes.

When we were reading the research we also read a lot about the role of social support. This led us to wonder if social support might impact the relationship between Negative Life Events and Positive Future Identity.

METHODS

The current study employed a secondary data analysis using data gathered on a project conducted by the Integrated Community Engagement project in West Virginia which has been reported on (Kristjansson et al. 2015).

PARTICIPANTS

There were 17,977 total participants, with 49.9% male, 48.1% female, and 2% were unknown. The adolescents were located in West Virginia. Participants' varied from ages 11-18, and described themselves as White (57.1%), Black (7.3%), Latino/a (4.2%), Asian(1.6%), Native Hawaiian (0.7%), American Indian (3.8%) and Other (25.3%). Participation in this study was voluntary and supervised.

SURVEY MEASURES

Positive Future Identity

Measured with 7 items
Cronbach's alpha: .94
Sample Item: "I have a definite sense of purpose in life"
Response Options: 5 point Likert scale 1=Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree
Citation: "APSI Sense of Identity" scale Lounsbury, Huffstetler, Leong, & Gibson (2005)

Social Support

Measured with 12 items
Cronbach's alpha: .89
Sample Item: "My family really tries to help me"
Response Options: 7 point Likert scale 1=Very Strongly Disagree to 7= VeryStrongly Agree
Citation: Zimet GD DN, Zimet SG, Farley GK. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. Journal of Personality Assessment (1988)

Negative Life Events

High Severity Events

1. "Been involved in a serious accident"
2. "Had a severe illness"
3. "Witnessed physical violence in your home in which an adult was involved"
4. "Been involved in physical violence in your home in which an adult was involved"
5. "The death of a parent or sibling"
6. "The death of a friend"
7. "Father or mother lost a job"
8. "Been expelled from school"
9. "Experienced sexual abuse (as the victim)"

Low Severity Events

1. "A separation or divorce of your parents"
2. "A serious argument with your parents"
3. "Witnessed a serious argument by your parents"
4. "A break up with a friend or loved one"
5. "Been rejected by your friends"
6. "A separation from a friend"
7. "Received an exceptionally low grade"
8. "Been dismissed from class or sent to the principal's office"

DATA ANALYSIS

Our research question is "Is the relationship between the severity of Negative Life Events and Identity attenuated by Social Support?". In order to examine this research question, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted.

The Independent variable(s) are NLEs (continuous) and social support (continuous) The dependent variable is Identity (continuous).

Control variables (gender, race, age) were included on the first step. Followed by the key study variables. The interaction term was added on the last step.

RESULTS

Results of the final model were significant (F 6, 9510= 947.25, $p < .01$). The final model accounted for 37.4% of the change in the dependent variable; Positive Future Identity.

| Variables | B | Std. Error | Beta | Sig. |
|---------------|--------|------------|-------|------|
| (Constants) | 12.288 | .456 | | .000 |
| Gender | -.238 | .109 | -.018 | .028 |
| Race | -.166 | .113 | -.012 | .143 |
| Age | 0.24 | .028 | .007 | .386 |
| SocSupT1 | .237 | .004 | .619 | .000 |
| NLEscountT1 | .001 | .037 | .000 | .982 |
| NLEsxSocSupT1 | -.002 | .001 | -.063 | .004 |

Note: R Squared = .374

FINDINGS

In the final model, the only control variable that remained significant was gender. Males were more likely to rate their positive future identity more positively. The second model revealed significant associations between both NLEs and Social Support on Future Identity. The final interaction model showed a significant interaction term between NLEs and Social Support associated with Future Identity, and NLEs was no longer significant.

CONCLUSION

Our findings indicate that social support does significantly attenuate the relationship between NLEs and positive future identity. The present study has implications for those who work with adolescents because it provides support for the notion that context matters in the health outcomes for young people. More specifically, it provides support for the importance of bolstering social support for young people, especially those who experience Negative Life Events.

