



The relationship among childhood risk and protective factors, racial microaggression and ethnic identity, and academic self-efficacy and antisocial behavior in young adulthood

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ABSTRACT

We examined how childhood and adolescent risk and protective factors and perceptions of racial microaggression and ethnic identity during young adulthood contributed to academic self-efficacy, substance abuse, and criminal intentions of 409 undergraduate students enrolled in a public urban university. Participants (mean age = 24) completed a web-based survey subsequent to a stratified, random sampling procedure. Findings from structural equation models revealed that risk factors reflecting problem behavior during childhood were associated with higher levels of substance use and criminal intentions during adulthood. The early protective factor of school engagement was positively related to academic self-efficacy and negatively related to criminal intentions in young adults. Racial microaggression was inversely related, while ethnic identity was positively associated, with academic self-efficacy among young adults after controlling for the influence of child and adolescent risk and protective factors. Implications for advancing interventions that address the influence of child and adolescent risk and protective factors, racial microaggression, and ethnic identity on academic and behavioral outcomes for young adults are noted.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The developmental period of young adulthood

Young adulthood is a period of human development marked by the transition from adolescence to the roles and responsibilities of adulthood. The significant life events that prescribe the roles and expectations for adulthood are well-known. Young people leave their parents' homes, establish careers, become financially stable, and start families of their own, usually in this order (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005). Meeting these milestones ultimately defines success as a young adult (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005).

Recent changes in socioeconomic culture have led to a number of social, educational, and employment challenges for young adults. For example, there is currently a dearth of employment and career options for young adults who do not pursue higher education or specialized training during young adulthood (Smith, Sum, Harris, Jordan, & Waldron, 2012). Even young adults who do attend college or receive training often face serious financial challenges between the ages of 20 and 30. Consequently, the general trend for many young adults has been to leave home at an older age, and to maintain full or partial

financial dependence on their parents while navigating the transition to adulthood. In addition, marriage and parenthood among today's young adults take many different forms and often are delayed. Although young adulthood is generally considered to occur between the ages of 18 and 25, for many the transition can span well into their 30s (Arnett, 2000; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005).

The pathway to establishing and succeeding in the roles and responsibilities of adulthood is ambiguous, and often confronted with little structure or guidance. Successfully navigating young adulthood requires a complex set of skills, resources, values, and the self-confidence necessary to avoid antisocial behaviors like substance abuse and crime and achieve success in education, work, and social settings. While most young adults experience positive growth and accomplishments, many others struggle during the years following adolescence, especially those exposed to disadvantage and risk during childhood (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005). Most young people require some support and resources beyond their own means, yet for those whose needs tend to be the most numerous and complex, those supports and resources are often least available.

Successful transition to adulthood is most likely for young people who attend and live at four-year college campuses following high school (Smith et al., 2012). These colleges provide an ideal support structure for the semi-autonomous status of young adulthood. In most cases, students in these environments are able to complete college

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degrees that, in turn, help them move through a linear process aimed at a successful career path. Access to college is difficult, however, for young people with minimal resources, those with limited academic success in high school, and those who already have adult responsibilities such as children and financial burdens. For many of these young adults, public post-secondary education is an important option toward obtaining an education that is affordable and can be structured around their other responsibilities. Finally, many young people pursuing public education also are disadvantaged by exposure to earlier and current life experiences and circumstances that are associated with a number of adverse outcomes during young adulthood. For many, their pursuit of higher education is an act of resilience in itself.

Prior studies show that educational attainment, substance abuse, and involvement in criminal behavior are among the most significant negative outcomes experienced by young adults (Child Trends Data Bank, 2010; Cusick, Courtney, & Havlicek, 2010; National Center for Health Statistics, 2009). In addition, a number of statistical trends show disproportionately high rates of these problems for economically disadvantaged and minority racial and ethnic populations (Child Trends Data Bank, 2010). These data raise serious concern about the capacity of many individuals to transition successfully to the roles and expectations of adulthood. Recent trends in educational attainment, substance abuse, and criminality are reviewed below.

1.2. Common negative outcomes in young adulthood

1.2.1. Educational attainment

Higher education and other forms of advanced training during young adulthood are necessary to enter and advance in the American workforce (Smith et al., 2012). Young adults who immediately enter the workforce with only a high school degree often have difficulty finding employment and face numerous obstacles to advancing their careers over time (Furstenberg et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2012). In 2012, 73% of 25–34 year old young adults with bachelor's degrees were employed full-time, year-round compared to only 60% of those who had completed high school or a high school equivalency examination. Although the rate for young people with bachelor's degrees did not change significantly between 2002 and 2012, young adults without a high school degree who worked full-time, year-round, dropped from 60% to 49%, and those who had only completed high school dropped from 64% to 60% during this same time period (Kena et al., 2014). A quotation from the report on the status of young adults by the Annie Casey Foundation illustrates the problems of employment in the absence of higher or specialized training:

More and more doors are closing for these young people. Entry-level jobs at fast-food restaurants and clothing stores that high school dropouts once could depend on to start their careers now go to older workers with better experience and credentials. It often takes a GED to get a job flipping hamburgers. Even some with college degrees are having trouble finding work (Smith et al., 2012).

The importance of college education in establishing even minimal success and stability during young adulthood means that enrollment in undergraduate education has become standard practice for many young adults. Not surprisingly, data spanning 1967 to 2009 reveal consistent increases in the percentage of young adults between 18 and 24 who enrolled in college. In 1967, 26% of young adults between 18 and 24 enrolled in college; by 2009, 41% of all young adults enrolled in college (Davis & Bauman, 2011). College enrollment rates began to level off and actually decreased between 2010 and 2012 (Kena et al., 2014). However the disparity in college enrollment between low-income and middle and high-income young adults with high school credential has become even greater during this time period. In 2012, 51% of low-income high school graduates entered college in comparison to 65% middle-income, and 81% high income students (Kena et al., 2014). On the other hand, after decades of disparities in enrollment between White and minority racial group students (not including Asians, who

have consistently displayed high education achievement), approximately two-thirds of White, Black and Hispanic high school graduates enrolled in college in 2012 (Kena et al., 2014).

Converging enrollment trends, while promising, do not obscure the persistent “achievement gap” between White students and racial minority students that begins in early childhood and persists throughout higher education in the U.S. (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Black and Hispanic children are more likely to be in high concentration poverty schools and tend to score lower than White children on standardized tests in elementary and middle school. Being Black or Hispanic is also related to a higher likelihood of dropping out of high school (Kena et al., 2014). Low-income students who do go to college are more likely to be enrolled in 2-year colleges than those with higher SES (who are more likely to attend 4-year private institutions) than lower SES students. Black and Hispanic and low SES students are also more likely to be enrolled in remedial courses in college (Sparks & Malkus, 2013), and students who take remedial courses in college are much less likely to complete college (Sparks & Malkus, 2013). From 1990 to 2013, the percentage of 25- to 29-year-olds who had attained a bachelor's or higher degree increased from 26% to 40% for Whites, from 13% to 20% percent for Blacks, from 8% to 16% percent for Hispanics, and from 43% to 58% for Asians/Pacific Islanders. While these rates increased for all of these racial groups, between 1990 and 2013, the gap in the rate of attainment of a bachelor's or higher degree between Whites and Blacks grew 13 to 20 percentage points, and the gap between Whites and Hispanics grew 18 to 25 percentage points.

1.2.2. Substance abuse

Most young adults who use drugs or alcohol initiate use during adolescence (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). The prevalence of substance use peaks during young adulthood before decreasing in the mid-20s. Young adults between 18 and 25 years old have higher rates of illicit drug use, alcohol use, and binge drinking than any other age group. Self-report data from the 2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health indicate that 21% of young adults used illicit drugs, including marijuana, in the past month. Thirteen percent of young adults reported heavy alcohol use and 43% reported binge drinking in 2013. Seventeen percent of 18 to 25 year-olds met criteria for drug or alcohol dependence or abuse in 2013 (SAMHSA, 2014).

Racial and ethnic differences in illicit drugs and alcohol use reveal that 12% of American Indians, 11% percent of blacks, 10% of whites, 9% of Latinos, and 3% of Asians used illicit drugs in the past month in 2013 (SAMSHA, 2014). Fifty-eight percent of Whites, 44% of Blacks, 37% of American Indians, and 35% of Asians reported current alcohol use. Rates of binge drinking were comparable for Whites (24%), American Indians (24%), and Latinos (24%) and lower for Blacks (20%) and Asians (2%) in 2013 (SAMSHA, 2014).

1.2.3. Criminal behavior

Young adults are disproportionately arrested and incarcerated in the U.S. Findings from a recent analysis of official record data revealed a dramatic increase in lifetime arrest rates during the period of late adolescence/early adulthood; in fact, between 30% and 41% of Americans have been arrested by the time they turn 23 years old (Brame, Turner, Paternoster, & Bushway, 2012). National crime statistics indicate that young adults (ages 18–29) accounted for more than 44% of all crimes committed in the country in 2012 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012).

Jail and prison populations are especially over-represented by young adult males (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009). Studies from the Child Trends Data Bank (2010) indicate that the number of young adults between 18 and 29 in prison or jail increased 14%—from nearly 750,000 to 862,000 people—between 1999 and 2008. Young Black men in their late teenage years are more likely to be incarcerated than any other minority group. In 2006, approximately 5% of non-Latino/

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