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Looking on the bright side: The role of identity status and gender on positive orientations during emerging adulthood

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Abstract

Emerging adulthood has been characterized as an age of possibilities that involves heightened identity exploration and risk-taking. Although some scholars have investigated the relation between identity status and risk behaviors in emerging adulthood, less attention has been paid to the relation between identity status and prosocial orientations. Thus, the current study examined how emerging adults' engagement in positive behaviors (i.e., prosocial tendencies, internalization of values, religiosity) varied as a function of identity status and gender. Results indicated that emerging adults who were in identity diffusion reported fewer prosocial tendencies, lower scores on internalization of values and lower religiosity, but emerging adults who were experiencing moratorium reported prosocial tendencies and levels of religiosity as frequently as emerging adults who had reached identity achievement. Also, young women reported higher levels of emotional and altruistic prosocial tendencies, higher levels of internalization of values, and higher levels of religiosity than did young men. The discussion focuses on emerging adulthood as a period of possibilities and exploration for not only risk behaviors, but prosocial behaviors as well.

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Introduction

For many young people in contemporary Western societies, the years from the late teens through the early twenties are a time of significant change and importance (Arnett, 2000). Because of the relative diversity in the trajectories of young people during this age period, there is considerable debate surrounding whether the characteristics of this age group represent a developmental period or merely an alternative trajectory (Collins & Madsen, 2006). Arnett (2000) contends that this age period (which he refers to as emerging adulthood) constitutes a distinct period of the life course for at least a portion of young people in predominantly Western, industrialized societies, and is different in important ways from both adolescence and adulthood. Indeed, unique characteristics of emerging adulthood have been found in China (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004), in Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003), and in Argentina (Facio & Micocci, 2003), as well as among religious minority groups (Barry & Nelson, 2005).

One of the most notable features of emerging adulthood is the opportunity it provides for identity exploration, particularly in the areas of love, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 2000). As a result of demographic shifts in postindustrial societies, some individuals in their late teens through the twenties, particularly those who are able to attend college instead of beginning full-time employment, marriage or parenthood roles, have few responsibilities compared to later in the lifespan. This allows for ample time to question values, laws, beliefs, norms, or standards; or to engage in experimentation with possible roles, a process of identity exploration first begun in adolescence (Erikson, 1968). The literature predominantly has documented the assorted risk behaviors of emerging adults (e.g., binge drinking, unprotected sex, illegal drug use; e.g., Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2005), but considerably less attention has been paid to emerging adults' positive orientations, and how the levels of and type of engagement with positive orientations might vary as a function of identity status and gender. Given that identity exploration and commitment have been associated with the achievement of adulthood criteria, and that self-perceived adults engage in fewer risk behaviors (Nelson & Barry, 2005) and are oriented more towards consideration of others (Nelson et al., in press), in addition to research suggesting gender differences in prosocial outcomes (Carlo & Randall, 2002), it follows that the frequency of positive orientations should vary as a function of one's identity status and gender.

Positive orientations

Although it has been documented that emerging adults often engage in assorted risk behaviors (Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006), it is likely that they also engage in a variety of positive behaviors. In the current study, we sought to examine a more global orientation towards positive behavior by focusing on three indicators of positive orientation: prosocial behavioral tendencies, internalization of prosocial values, and religious faith. Given that current research on emerging adults focuses primarily on behavior that is potentially harmful to self (e.g., substance use, risky sexuality) or others (e.g., drunk/risky driving), we sought to highlight behavior or tendencies that are meant to *benefit* others. Prosocial behavioral tendencies (defined as behavioral tendencies meant to benefit another), internalization of prosocial values, and religiosity are all indicators assessing the potential underlying beliefs that support the display of positive behaviors, and

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