Paths to Life and Career Satisfaction in Midlife from Trajectories of Depressive Symptoms in Young Adulthood:

Roles of Marriage and Unemployment

Andrea L. Howard
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Harvey J. Krahn
University of Alberta
Emerging Adult Mental Health

• Prevalence of psychiatric problems of North American young people in their 20s is high (Kessler et al., 2005; Statistics Canada, 2002)

• Recent studies show improvement in mental health (e.g., depression) across the emerging and young adult years (Galambos et al., 2006; Meadows et al., 2006; Schulenberg et al., 2005; Tanner et al., 2007)

• Trajectories of improving mental health in emerging adulthood are associated with greater well-being in young adulthood (Howard et al., 2010)
Challenges of the transition to adulthood

• By age 30, half of adults are married; ~75% are employed full-time (Oesterle et al., 2010)

• Most report that marriage is an important life goal (Carroll et al., 2007)

• Frequent barriers to satisfactory adult employment
  • Part-time, temporary work increasing; well-paying permanent jobs with good benefits decreasing
  • Frequent experiences of unemployment

• Influences of declining or improving depression in emerging/young adulthood on midlife functioning may vary given success in marriage and labour market
Subjective functioning in Midlife

- Life satisfaction: self-evaluation of quality of life, success, subjective well-being
  - Negatively associated with depression (Koivuma-Honkanen et al., 2004)

- Career satisfaction: subjective evaluation of career success; finding meaningful, satisfying, stable work
  - Aggression in childhood predicts long-term unemployment in adulthood and downward occupational mobility (Kokko & Pulkkinen, 2000; Caspi et al., 1987)
Motivating question

- How are initial levels and seven-year trajectories of depressive symptoms associated with life and career satisfaction in adulthood after accounting for the influence of concurrent marriage and unemployment?
Edmonton School-Work Transitions Study

• 14-year longitudinal study of the education, employment, family, and community experiences of university graduates in 1985

• 589 University of Alberta graduates (52% men) from five largest faculties (Arts, Business, Education, Engineering, Science)

• Follow-up surveys:
  • 1986 (ages 21-30) n = 458
  • 1987 (ages 22-31) n = 421
  • 1989 (ages 24-33) n = 391
  • 1992 (ages 27-36) n = 357
  • 1999 (ages 34-43) n = 349
Measures

- Control variables (*age, sex, parents’ education as SES measure*)
- Depressive symptoms: Four items from the CES-D
  - e.g., “I felt depressed”; “I felt lonely”
- Time-varying predictors of depressive symptoms:
  - currently married/cohabiting
  - months unemployed, past year
- Life satisfaction: Five items
  - e.g., “I have succeeded in reaching the goals that I set for myself at this stage in life”
- Career satisfaction: Three items
  - e.g., “How satisfied are you with your career at this point”
- Midlife family and unemployment variables
  - married/divorced, raising children, income, occupational prestige, cumulative spells of unemployment

*Coefficient alpha for measures of depressive symptoms ranged from .68 to .84 across waves of assessment*
*Life and career satisfaction scales constructed and validated using item response theory procedures*
Emerging and Young Adulthood

- Age 23: Control variables, Depressive symptoms, Marriage
- Age 24: Depressive symptoms, Marriage, Unemployment
- Age 25: Depressive symptoms, Marriage, Unemployment
- Age 27: Depressive symptoms, Marriage, Unemployment
- Age 30: Depressive symptoms, Marriage, Unemployment

Adulthood

- Age 37: Life satisfaction, Career satisfaction, Midlife family and employment variables
Growth model for depressive symptoms
Time-varying effects of marriage
Time-varying effects of unemployment
Predicting life and career satisfaction
Contributions of Age 37 covariates
Results

CFI = .97; RMSEA = .03; BIC = 12711.30; χ² (74) = 116.72, p < .01
Results
Conclusions

• Adjusting for marriage and unemployment, depressive symptoms continue to predict improved functioning in midlife
  • Fewer symptoms and improvements in symptoms are robust predictors of later life and career satisfaction

• Marital and unemployment experiences serve to shift emerging/young adults onto more or less advantaged trajectories of depressive symptoms
  • Downstream life and career satisfaction advantages for those who are married; disadvantages for those who are more frequently unemployed
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