Ethnic Identity and Mental Health in American Indian Youth: Examining Mediation Pathways through Self-esteem, and Future Optimism


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To advance understanding of the relationships between three potential protective factors—ethnic identity, self-esteem, and future optimism—and mental health (i.e., anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, and externalizing behavior) among a racially/ethnically diverse group of early adolescents (American Indian, Caucasian, African American, and Latino/Hispanic).
Background

- Mental health functioning in American Indians is an important, but understudied, topic. Compared to other racial/ethnic groups, American Indian youth have an elevated risk for mental health disorders (Beals et al., 1997).

- American Indians today are still affected by the historical traumas from massacres and relocations (Thorton, 1987).

- The Lumbee Tribe has additional difficulties because they are not fully recognized by the federal government, so they do not receive full tribal benefits (Bryant & LaFromboise, 2005).

(Smokowski, Evans, Cotter, & Webber, 2014)
• An optimistic future orientation is a protective factor (McCabe & Barnett, 2000)
• Self-esteem is inversely associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety, and externalizing behaviors (Derdikman-Eiron et al., 2011; Ybrandt & Armelius, 2010)
• Studies have found a positive association between ethnic identity and self-esteem for some racial/ethnic groups (Martinez & Duke, 1997), but the findings are inconsistent for this relationship for American Indians (Pittenger, 1998)

(Smokowski, Evans, Cotter, & Webber, 2014)
Hypotheses

- Ethnic identity is positively associated with self-esteem and future orientation
- Self-esteem is positively associated with future optimism
- There is an inverse relationship between future optimism and mental health problems
- There is an inverse relationship between self-esteem and mental health outcomes
- Self-esteem and future optimism both mediate the relationship between ethnic identity and mental health outcomes

(Smokowski, Evans, Cotter, & Webber, 2014)
Methods

- Used data from a 5-year longitudinal panel study: North Carolina Academic Center for Excellence Rural Adaptation Project

- Final sample size was 4,714
  - 33% Caucasian; 29% American Indian (Lumbee); 28% African American; 9% Latino
  - 51% female
  - Mean age of 13.39 years
  - 67% receiving free/reduced lunch
  - 94% speaking English at home
  - 71% living in a family with two adults

(Smokowski, Evans, Cotter, & Webber, 2014)
• Measures: Items from the School Success Profile (Bowen & Richman, 2008) and three additional subscales
  – Ethnic identity: 6-item scale (α = .92)
  – Self-esteem: 5-item scale (α = .91)
  – Future optimism: 12-item scale (α = .95)
  – Depressive symptoms: outcome variable; 4-item scale (α = .89)
  – Anxiety symptoms: outcome variable; 3-item scale (α = .80)
  – Externalizing behavior: outcome variable; 12-item scale (α = .87)

(Smokowski, Evans, Cotter, & Webber, 2014)
There was a positive relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem and between ethnic identity and future optimism.

There was a positive relationship between self-esteem and future optimism; this was the strongest relationship in the model.

Self-esteem was inversely related to mental health issues.

(Smokowski, Evans, Cotter, & Webber, 2014)
Results (cont.)

- There were mixed findings for the effect of future optimism on mental health overall, but there was an inverse relationship for depression in Lumbee youth.

- Self-esteem mediated the impact of ethnic identity on depression, anxiety, and externalizing behavior.

- Future optimism mediated the effects of ethnic identity on externalizing behavior for all ethnicities, and on depression for Lumbee youth only.

(Smokowski, Evans, Cotter, & Webber, 2014)
Implications for Practice

- There is support for promoting ethnic identity, self-esteem, and future optimism to impact mental health outcomes.

- Building self-esteem should be a central intervention target in promoting positive adaptation and mental health for all adolescents.

- Programming that increases ethnic identity and self-esteem might be effective for decreasing mental health symptoms for Lumbee youth.

(Smokowski, Evans, Cotter, & Webber, 2014)
References


References


Funding for this research was provided through a cooperative agreement with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (5 U01 CE001948-03) and the North Carolina Academic Center for Excellence in Youth Violence Prevention (PI: Paul Smokowski, Ph.D.)