

In What Ways is Social Connectedness Associated with Adolescents' Mental Health?

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Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the ways in which social connectedness is associated with the mental health of adolescents. It was chosen to limit this study to adolescents because this is a pivotal developmental period, where youth begin to determine their adult identities. According to the World Health Organization, adolescence takes place between the ages of 10 and 19 (Sacks, 2003). However, some of the research cited in this paper includes participants whose ages were a few years outside of this range yet were still considered adolescents developmentally. Another inherent limitation of this paper is due to the vague definition of social connectedness across cultures and settings.

Having a sense of connectedness with others can have a profound impact on various areas of individuals' lives. The term "social connectedness" is often used to refer to a sense of belonging and interpersonal closeness (Malaquias, Crespo, & Francisco, 2015; McLouglin, Spears, & Taddeo, 2018). Multiple research studies have shown that those who have stronger social connections are more likely to live longer and happier lives. Across almost all the countries involved, the World Value Survey (1999-2004) found that people who spent more time with friends reported greater levels of happiness. In the Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the most renowned longitudinal studies, Robert Waldinger (2016) pointed out that having social connections was one of the most key contributors to happiness and health (as cited in Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020). Without vital connections, people are more at risk of feeling lonely.

The absence of a sense of connection and belonging can lead to loneliness, which has profound negative impacts. Loneliness has been shown to be as detrimental to physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes daily and is connected to several serious medical conditions (HRSA,

2019). Holt-Lunstad (2015) found that loneliness can increase the chances of death by 29% (as cited in Campaign to End Loneliness, n.d.). In a study with over 20,000 survey responses, it was found that loneliness negatively impacted physical as well as mental health (Bruce, Wu, Lustig, Russell, & Nemecek, 2019). Psychiatric disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia, can all be traced back in some cases to loneliness (Howe, 2019). In the United States, 20% of people feel lonely or socially isolated, and 40% feel that they lack meaningful relationships (HRSA, 2019). Clearly, this is a significant and pervasive issue.

Although loneliness is often associated with the elderly population, recent research indicated that it is actually more prevalent among younger generations. The results of the survey previously noted also showed that loneliness was more frequently reported among those who were younger in age (Bruce et al., 2019). Another study indicated that the youngest age group of participants, between the ages of 16-24, reported the highest rate of loneliness (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Therefore, it is important to assess the impacts of loneliness and social connection among younger generations. A study by Ladd and Ettekal in 2013 indicated that a sense of belonging is a significant part of adolescents developing socially, emotionally, and physically (as cited in London & Ingram, 2018). In light of the significant role that social connectedness plays in the lives of adolescents, it is critical to explore the association between social connectedness and mental health among this population.

Problem Exploration

Current literature indicated that social connectedness is associated with benefitting adolescents' mental health. Although there were not many empirical studies that demonstrated a causation, there were many that showed significant correlations between social connectedness

and advantages for adolescents. Those who reported stronger social connections also exhibited improved overall wellbeing, less risky behaviors, and decreased anxiety and depression.

Wellbeing

Social connectedness was connected with improving the overall wellbeing of adolescents. Wellbeing for the purpose of this paper includes life satisfaction, confidence, positive affect, and aspirations. In one study, researchers looked at the relationships between wellbeing and social connectedness among participants who were 10-15 years old. The social connections could exist within the context of family, school, peers, and neighbors. Researchers found a positive correlation between the existence of strong social relationships and improved wellbeing. The results suggested that adolescents with greater social connectedness were more likely to experience greater levels of wellbeing (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012).

Furthermore, positive social connections are vital to adolescent wellbeing in the face of maltreatment. Researchers looked at the relationship between psychological maltreatment, social connectedness, social acceptance, and wellbeing in high-school students. The study showed that while an increase in psychological maltreatment was connected with a decrease in social acceptance and social connectedness, psychological maltreatment did not predict wellbeing. However, social acceptance and social connectedness did positively correlate with wellbeing. Researchers concluded that social acceptance and social connectedness acted as the mediator between psychological maltreatment and wellbeing (Arslan, 2018). Additionally, it is well known that adverse childhood experiences are strongly linked with long-term detriments to physical and mental health. A study out of BioMed Central established this and also showed that the presence of at least one trustworthy adult in a child's life could greatly offset the negative effects of maltreatment (Bellis, 2017). Social connectedness appears to play an integral role in

the wellbeing of adolescents whether or not they are facing psychological maltreatment.

Increasing social connectedness among adolescents holds the potential to increase their overall wellbeing concurrently.

Risky Behaviors

More specifically, social connectedness is associated with a decrease in risky behaviors, such as unprotected sex, substance abuse, and suicide, among adolescents. Positive relationships appeared to be a protective factor against adolescents participating in risky behaviors in many cases. Adolescents who reported lower social connectedness engaged in more sexually risky behaviors. Furthermore, an increase in sexually risky behaviors were also related to an increase in reports of substance abuse (Rew, Carver, & Li, 2011). In another study lower school connectedness correlated with higher rates of substance abuse (Meisel & Colder, 2017; Seil, Desai, & Smith, 2014). Thereby, it appears that a lack of connection increases the likelihood that adolescents will engage in activities that are potentially threatening to their physical and mental health.

Even more alarmingly, inadequate social connections were linked with an increase in suicidal ideation and suicide. Positive relationships appeared to be particularly beneficial to those who had previously struggled with suicidal thoughts and attempts. For adolescents who had been recently discharged from psychiatric hospitals due to suicidal ideation, improved connectedness with peers resulted in adolescence being half as likely to attempt suicide again. Also female adolescents who had improved connections with peers reported less suicidal ideations (Czyz, Liu, & King, 2012). Similar results were found in a study conducted in an academic setting. High-school students who had connections with a teacher or another adult at school reported less substance use, suicidal ideation, and suicidal attempts. Although this was true among

heterosexual students, findings were even more significant among students who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Seil et al., 2014). Social connectedness not only appears to enhance life, but it also seems to preserve it.

Anxiety & Depression

The most specific and prevalent way that social connectedness appeared to relate to the mental health of adolescents was by decreasing symptoms of anxiety and depression. In one study, researchers looked at the interplay between social connectedness, family rituals, and depression and anxiety among students between the ages of 15 and 20. Within this study, family rituals referred to repeated events that were considered special between at least two family members. Social connectedness was defined as interpersonal closeness between family, peers, and society. Results showed a positive correlation between family rituals and social connectedness and a negative relationship between family rituals and anxiety and depression. Also, when greater levels of social connectedness were reported, there were less reports of anxiety and depression. A mediation analysis showed that family rituals were associated with a decrease in anxiety and depression because of the way they increase social connectedness (Malaquias, Crespo, & Francisco, 2015). In another study, improved social connectedness with peers and family led to a decrease in depressive symptoms (Czyz et al., 2012).

Although not all adolescents have family members or other supportive adults, research has indicated that a sense of social connectedness in the school setting can also have a positive influence on mental health. Increased school connectedness was associated with a decrease in the number of reports of anxious and depressed symptoms among adolescents (Meisel & Colder, 2017). In another study having a sense of connection to an adult at school was correlated with a decrease in depression (Seil et al., 2014). With school providing regular interactions between

adolescents and various adults, opportunities exist for connections to be made, which may decrease the symptoms of anxiety and depression for students.

In the face of stressors, social connectedness still appeared to play a role in decreasing anxiety and depression. When encountering cyberbullying, adolescents had less depression, anxiety, and stress when they had a greater sense of social connection, which was defined as confidence and a sense of belonging that extends beyond family and friends (McLouglin & Taddeo, 2018). Furthermore, this seemed key for adolescents who did not have homes. Among youth between the ages of 16 and 22 without permanent housing, the presence of positive role models and those who could be relied on for support led to a decrease in anxiety and depression (Tyler, Schmitz, & Ray, 2018). Social connections were closely linked with decreasing anxiety and depression among adolescents in a variety of situations.

Limitations

Research was limited by a number of different factors. Many of the studies were based on self-reports (Arslan, 2018; Jose et al., 2012; Meisel & Colder, 2017; Rew et al., 2011; Seil et al., 2014; Tyler et al., 2018). Another element of the methodology that limited generalizability was the cross-sectional design that was utilized (Arslan, 2018; McLouglin et al., 2018; Seil et al., 2014). Also, the use of convenience samples limits implications (Malaquias et al., 2015). Generalizability was limited due to the specific characteristics of the participants or settings (Meisel & Colder, 2017; Arslan, 2018; Czyn et al., 2012; Seil, et al., 2014; Tyler et al., 2018). Another factor that limits the applications of the results was a small sample size (Rew et a., 2011). Lastly, studying social connectedness comes with inherent limitations since it is difficult to create measures for terms that can be defined differently depending on the context (Czyn et al., 2012; Jose et al., 2012).

Theoretical Perspectives

The Ecological Approach Theory recognizes that individuals are impacted by the different environments which they are involved. Research indicated that adolescents' environments are composed of family, school, peers, and community. As youth are embedded in different social contexts concurrently, these identified environments simultaneously impact overall wellbeing (Jose et al., 2012). Therefore, this theory illuminates the importance of exploring social connectedness within the contexts of adolescents' relations at home, in school, with their peers, and among the community.

Social Control Theory and the Social Development Theory were used in explaining the connection between social connectedness and substance abuse among adolescents (Meisel & Codler, 2017). The Social Development Theory postulates that social interactions play a significant part in forming cognitive development and that meaning is created by community (McLeod, 2018). The Social Control Theory asserts that a connection to family, school, and society decrease the likelihood of engaging in deviant behavior ("Social Control and Self Control Theories," 2016). Together these theories were used to explain how an increase in school connectedness was associated with a decrease in substance abuse among adolescents (Meisel & Colder, 2017).

Gaps in the Literature

Further research on areas related to social connectedness and the mental health of adolescents would be beneficial. In the future, it would be ideal to conduct a study with a multimethod approach in order to increase the validity of self-reports (Jose et al., 2012). A need exists for more longitudinal studies involving social connectedness (McLouglin et al., 2018).

Future studies should explore the best approaches to developing social connectedness between adolescents and adults (Seil et al., 2014).

Conclusion and Position

Findings

Social connectedness appears to improve the lives of adolescents through enhancing wellbeing, lessening engagement in risky behaviors, and decreasing symptoms of anxiety and depression. The overall wellbeing of adolescents seemed to be improved by social connectedness even when adolescents faced maltreatment. Adolescents who had stronger social connections tended to not engage in risky behaviors, such as sexual acts, substance abuse, and suicide. Symptoms of depression and anxiety decreased as social connections increased in a variety of contexts. This showed to be true even when adolescents reported only having one adult that could be trusted. In line with the National Association of Social Work, the value of relationships can have profound implications on the trajectory of adolescents' lives.

Position

While it was expected that social connectedness would be largely associated with benefitting adolescents' mental health, the results of this literature review can be relevant and useful to those who work with young people. The literature review more specifically showed the areas, which may be improved by strengthened social connections. Thereby, those who regularly interact with adolescents have increased awareness of the value and potential of social connectedness. Although the literature did not cover the potential detriments of social connections, it did show that adolescents can be greatly impacted in this area by peers, friends, family members, other adults, teachers, school, and the community.

Recommendations

Given the overall benefits of social connectedness to the wellbeing of adolescents, social workers should seek to promote the development of interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging when working with individuals, families, schools, and communities. Since promoting positive relationships can improve the wellbeing of adolescents, interventions should include promoting social connectedness (Jose et al., 2012). Social workers should seek to encourage adolescents to form social connections with peers through promoting the development of social skills (McLouglin et al., 2018; Czyn et al., 2012). When working with families, social workers should seek to encourage the practice of family rituals, as this increases a sense of social connectedness (Malaquias, 2015).

Developing positive relationships and a sense of belonging is even more vital for adolescents who face greater challenges. Seeing that psychological maltreatment can actually weaken adolescents' social connections, social workers need to incorporate interventions that counteract this (Arslan, 2018). Implementing treatment plans and interventions that strengthen connections between adolescents and their peers and adults in their lives is important among youth who are being discharged from hospitals following suicide attempts (Czyn et al., 2012). When working with adolescents who struggle with anxiety or depression, it is important to encourage the strengthening of positive social support. Specifically, strong connections with teachers and pastors and other adults can be beneficial (Tyler et al., 2018).

Social workers should also seek to equip adults with strategies to give adolescents a sense of social support. The first step in this process is spreading awareness among adults regarding how greatly their support can impact adolescents. In this way, those working with adolescents may recognize the need and importance of promoting and facilitating social connectedness. Providing resources, training, and feedback to those who work in the school setting and those

raising children is especially important (Seil et al., 2014). In some cases, it only takes a connection with one person to make all the difference.

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