

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SENSE OF BELONGING TO YOUTH SERVICE AGENCIES: A RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTOR ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: The study explores the importance of attendance, age, and a sense of belonging in predicting various risk and protective factors and problem behaviors among youths participating in United Way-sponsored youth service agencies (n = 98). Multivariate multiple regression analyses indicate that belonging, more importantly than attendance, has a significant positive relationship with protective factors and a significant negative relationship with various risk factors and problem behaviors. Analyses also indicate that youths become more at risk as they get older and, therefore, suggest the importance of involvement in youth development programming during the adolescent years. Findings are discussed and implications for future practice are provided.

KEY WORDS: belonging; risk factors; protective factors; youth.

Youth service agencies have been called upon to assist in preventing and deterring academic failure, juvenile delinquency, alcohol and drug use, violent crime, and teenage pregnancy. Many positive outcomes have occurred (e.g., Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). Involvement in these programs is typically quantified through examining self-reported attendance or past program attendance records. Recent research, however, has examined the protective influences of belonging, bonding, and attachment to these and other pro-social entities (Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002; Hawkins & Catalano, 1995; Osterman, 2000).

Several theories, including social learning theory, social control theory, and social identity theory, point to the importance of belonging, commitment, bonding, and identification within social structures and how these factors impact opportunities to engage in, promote actual involvement in, and provide perceived rewards for engaging in pro-social or anti-social behaviors. Based on these theoretical frameworks, the development of belonging among participants has been identified as a central task in many youth

development programs. For example, agencies and programs such as Big Brother/Big Sisters, Inc., Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Inc., and 4-H discuss the importance of fostering relationships and connections between mentors, staff, and youth participants in their program missions and purposes.

The assumption behind this emergent theory of change is that youths get more from their involvement when participation includes having a connection or bond with a particular program, believing one is a valuable member, and/or being committed to the agency's rules and norms (Anderson-Butcher, Lawson, Fallara, & Furano, 2002). The concept of social capital also enlightens this theory. As Putnam (2000) notes:

The presence of social capital—individuals connected to one another through trusting networks and common values—allows for the enforcement of positive standards for youths and offers them access to mentors, role models, educational sponsors, and job contacts...By contrast, the absence of positive norms, community associations, and informal adult friendship and kin networks leaves kids to their own devices. It is in such settings that youths are most likely to act on shortsighted or self-destructive impulses. (p. 58)

Given the importance of social connections, networks, and the adoption of pro-social norms, this study begins to explore belonging to youth service agencies and its role in promoting positive youth development. Specifically, it tests the relationship of a sense of belonging, more so than attendance, to various risk and protective factors among youths who participate in United Way- sponsored youth service agencies. Risk factors, or variables that increase the likelihood for engaging in problem behaviors (Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999), are measured. Protective factors, or variables that alter or nullify youths' responses to risks that predispose them to problem behaviors (Fraser et al., 1997) are examined. Belonging and attendance and their relations to antisocial behaviors, substance use, and academic problems, also are explored.

Additionally, participation and a sense of belonging to youth service agencies may be increasingly important as youth age; participation in these programs declines as youths get older (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003; Quinn, 1999); older youth involved in these programs are less likely to experience a strong sense of belonging to the organizations and programs (Anderson-Butcher, 2000); and older youth are more likely to engage in problem behaviors (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, Ferrari, 2003; St. Pierre, Mark, Kaltreider, & Aikin, 1997). Therefore, this study also explores the role of age as a predictor of risk factors, protective factors, and related problem behaviors.

METHOD

Sample

A convenience sample of 98 youths involved in five different United Way-sponsored youth service agencies was used. These youths represented approximately 25% of the youths who regularly attended these programs. Specifically, 45% of youths attended Boys & Girls Club programs; 11% were involved in Big Brothers/Big Sisters; 16% attended the Jewish Community Center; 13% attended "other" after-school programs; and 3% of the youths attended programs offered by non-profit settlement houses. It is noteworthy that 12% indicated "don't know" to this question. The mean age of respondents was 11.2 years and ages ranged from 9-14 years of age. Fifty-one percent of the respondents were male and 48% were female. Forty percent of respondents indicated they were White, 10% were African American, 8.0% were American Indian/Native American, 28.0% were Hispanic, 7.0% were Asian or Pacific Islanders, and 7.0% marked "other".

Please note that these data were collected as part of a collaborative program evaluation project among these youth service agencies. The data were collected by these agencies to help them meet accountability expectations outlined by their local United Way funder.

Instrumentation

Belonging scale. The five-item belonging scale (Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002) was used to measure a sense of belonging with the youth development program. It measures the degree to which youth feel comfortable, supported, and accepted at the program ($\alpha = .95$).

Attendance. Participants reported the number of times they attended the program in the last 30 days. Ratings were made on a 7-point ordinal scale (Anderson-Butcher, 2000).

Age. Participants provided their age on the survey.

Risk and protective factors. Peer and individual risk and protective factors among youths were assessed through the Utah Division of Substance Abuse Needs Assessment Survey (Social Research Institute, 1997). This instrument is modeled after the Student Survey of Risk and Protective Factors Instrument (Arthur, Pollard, Hawkins, & Catalano, 1997) and is deemed reliable and valid (O'Donovan, 1996; Social Research Institute, 1997). Individual risk factor subscales examined in the analyses include individual, peer relationship-based, and attitudinal related factors. Individual risk factors included measures of impulsivity, sensation seeking, and rebelliousness. Peer relationship-based factors included subscales measuring friends' drug use and interactions with antisocial peers. Attitudinal-related risk factors included subscales measuring attitudes favorable to drug use, attitudes toward antisocial behavior, perceived risk of drug use, and rewards for antisocial behavior. Individual subscales measuring various protective factors also were included in the study.

Specifically, measures of community opportunities for pro-social involvement (i.e., availability of extracurricular activities, etc.), and community rewards for pro-social involvement (i.e., reinforcement and encouragement from neighbors) were used. As well, the subscale measuring various social skills was included.

Problem behaviors. The Utah Division of Substance Abuse Needs Assessment Survey was used to measure 30-day alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use (Social Research Institute, 1997). In addition, gang involvement, antisocial behaviors, and early involvement in antisocial behavior subscales on the Needs Assessment Survey were examined. The gang involvement subscale included items such as, "Have you ever belonged to a gang?" and "How many of your best friends have been members of a gang?" Antisocial behaviors such as involvement in crime and truancy from school were assessed, as well as one's age upon first engaging in these behaviors. Academic problems were assessed by having youth report their grades and grades in comparison to other students in their class. Individual items also were examined including the number of days of school skipped or cut and the importance of grades for later in life.

Procedures

Youth development program staff members recruited youths to participate in the study. Once parent/guardian permission was given, and assent if necessary, participants completed the questionnaires assessing the targeted variables. The entire battery of questionnaires took approximately 40 minutes to complete, depending on the age and education level of the youth.

Analysis

Correlations determined the relationships among age, attendance, and a sense of belonging in youth development programs. Because the independent variables (i.e., belonging, age, and attendance) resulted in a mixture of continuous and categorical data and there were several dependent continuous variables, three multivariate multiple regression analyses were employed to determine the effect of the independent variables on risk factors, protective factors, and problem behaviors. In instances of missing data, cases were deleted (listwise deletion).

RESULTS

Correlational analyses revealed a moderate, significant relationship between attendance and belonging ($r = .32$). This suggests that, while attendance is related to belonging, there are other aspects that contribute to a belonging beyond program attendance. Age had a significant negative correlation with belonging ($r = -.31$) but not attendance ($r = -.06$). This suggests that, for these subjects, as age increases, belonging scores decrease.

Age, Attendance, Belonging and Risk Factors

A multivariate multiple regression analysis examined the effects of age, attendance, and belonging on the following dependent variables: individual risk factors, peer relationship-based risk factors, and attitudinal-related risk factors. The overall equation was significant: $F(3, 94) = 2.21$, $p > .01$, indicating that age, attendance, and belonging in this sample are significantly related to risk factors. Follow-up univariate analyses revealed that eight of the nine relationships were significant (perceived risk of drug use being the only non significant relationship). The variance explained in the outcome variables ranged from 18% for sensation-seeking and attitudes toward anti-social behavior to 6% for rebelliousness (e.g., 18% of the variance in risk factors could be predicted by scores on sensation-seeking, etc.). Attendance did not contribute significantly to any of the outcomes suggesting its effects may have been consumed by age and belonging. Beta weights provide an indication of which variables were the strongest predictors of the outcome variables. Belonging was a significant independent predictor of rewards for anti-social behaviors (with a beta weight of $-.27$), indicating that, as belonging scores increased, scores on the scale decreased significantly. Age and belonging were both significant predictors of sensation seeking (belonging had a beta weight of $-.23$; age had a beta weight of $.22$). Thus, as participants got older, they had significantly higher scores on the sensation seeking scale, whereas participants with higher belonging scores had significantly lower scores on this scale. Age was the only independent significant predictor in six of the risk factors (impulsivity, rebelliousness, peer drug use, interactions with anti-social peers, attitudes favorable toward drug use, attitudes toward anti-social behaviors). The beta weights all suggest that, as participants got older, their perceptions of risk factors increased. Results of the analysis can be seen in Table 1.

Age, Attendance, Belonging and Protective Factors

A multivariate multiple regression examined the effects of age, attendance and belonging on the various protective factors. The overall equation was significant, $F(3, 94) = 4.43$, $p < .001$, indicating that age, attendance, and belonging are significantly related to protective factors in this sample. Follow-up univariate analysis revealed that all three relationships were significant. The variance explained in the outcome variables ranged from 17% for social skills to 11% for community rewards for pro-social involvement, and 10% for community opportunities for pro-social involvement (e.g., 17% of the variance in protective factors could be explained by scores on social skills, etc.). Attendance did not contribute significantly to any of the outcomes suggesting it may have been consumed by belonging and age. Belonging and age contributed significantly to community opportunities for pro-social involvement. The beta weight for belonging was $.36$ whereas

Table 1

Results of Multivariate Multiple Regression with Age, Attendance, and Belonging on Risk Factors Followed by Univariate Analyses

Dependent Variable	Adjusted R2	F	Beta	t
Att. for Anti-Social Behavior	.18	7.01***		
Age			.40	3.80***
Attendance			-.01	-.09
Belonging			-.11	-1.00
Sensation-Seeking	.18	7.04***		
Age			.22	2.10*
Attendance			-.18	-1.80
Belonging			-.23	-2.10*
Drug Use	.16	6.68***		
Age			.44	4.23***
Attendance			.07	.68
Belonging			.01	.03
Att. Favorable to Drugs	.14	5.56***		
Age			.34	3.19***
Attendance			.02	.23
Belonging			-.14	-1.31
Impulsivity	.13	5.13***		
Age			.34	3.20***
Attendance			.03	.76
Belonging			-.11	-1.04
Interact anti-social peers	.11	4.33***		
Age			.31	2.9***
Attendance			.01	.13
Belonging			-.12	-1.01
Rewards for anti-social beh.	.07	3.23*		
Age			.10	.93
Attendance			-.01	-.09
Belonging			-.27	2.30*
Rebelliousness	.06	2.97*		
Age			-.28	2.10*
Attendance			-.07	-.59
Belonging			-.03	-.27

Multivariate F = 2.21 (3, 94), p < .01, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

the beta weight for age was .26, which suggests that as belonging scores and age increase, so do participants' perceptions of community opportunities for pro-social involvement. Belonging was the only independent significant predictor of community rewards for pro-social behavior and had a beta of .23, suggesting that as belonging scores increased, so did perceptions of this protective factor. Age was the only independent predictor of social skills; however, it had a negative beta weight (-.45), meaning that, as age increased, scores on this scale went down significantly.

Age, Attendance, Belonging, and Problem Behaviors

A multivariate multiple regression also examined the effects of age, attendance, and belonging on problem behaviors. Results of the analysis can be found in Table 1. The multivariate analysis was significant, $F(3, 94) = 1.59, p < .05$, indicating that the independent variables are significantly related to problem behaviors. Five of the univariate analyses were significant, including alcohol use, marijuana use, cigarette use, gang involvement, and the importance of grades for later in life. Again, attendance was not an independent significant contributor to the equation. Age was a significant independent contributor to four of the variables (alcohol use, marijuana use, cigarette use, and gang involvement) and all beta weights were positive, indicating that, as participants got older, they were significantly more likely to engage in these behaviors. Belonging was an independent significant contributor to one variable, namely the importance of learning in school for later in life. The beta weight was positive, indicating that, as belonging scores increased, so did their perception of the importance of school.

DISCUSSION

Study results support the role of belonging in promoting certain aspects of positive youth development. Whereas age, belonging, and attendance were significantly related to problem behaviors, risk factors, and protective factors overall, only belonging and age produced significant effects in the univariate analyses that followed. Age predicted the greatest significant unique variance in many of the risk and protective factors and problems behaviors. Youths reported more risk and were more likely to engage in problem behaviors as they aged. A sense of belonging was uniquely, significantly, and positively related to several protective factors, including community opportunities and rewards for pro-social involvement and enhanced perceptions about the importance of school for later in life. Likewise, belonging was independently negatively related to attitudes toward anti-social behavior and sensation-seeking. Attendance was not related to risk and protective factors or problem behaviors.

Several limitations exist, however, within this research. The study is cross-sectional in nature. Therefore, one does not truly know if belonging impacts risk and protective factors and problem behaviors or if youths

with low risk and high protection who display fewer problem behaviors are simply more likely to engage in youth development programs and establish a sense of belonging. Further, a convenience sample was used and self-selection biases may exist. Additionally, the amount of variance explained in these behaviors was small in some instances. It must be considered that many factors play a role in these behaviors (i.e., parental support, family conflict, peer relationships, level of supervision, type of programming, etc.). Considering these limitations, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Implications

To overview, findings suggest that mere attendance in youth service agencies does not necessarily relate to enhanced protection and decreased risk and display of problem behaviors. In this sample, attendance was not uniquely significantly related to any of these factors. Thus, while it is certainly important to get youths to attend these programs, efforts must go beyond just "getting them through the door". As Putnam (2000) notes, "An individual who 'belongs to' half a dozen community groups may actually be active in none. What really matters from the point of view of social capital and civic engagement is not merely nominal membership but active and involved membership" (p. 58). Study findings reinforce this fact as a sense of belonging was important in predicting various risk and protective factors. Specifically, belonging was positively related to community opportunities and rewards for pro-social involvement and enhanced perceptions about the importance of school for later in life. Likewise, belonging was negatively related to attitudes toward anti-social behavior and sensation-seeking. These findings may suggest that, as a sense of belonging to the youth service agency is built, youths are more likely to adopt the program's established norms and values (Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002; Osterman, 2000).

The value of a sense of belonging, as opposed to attendance alone, is a significant finding. We know, however, that youth cannot experience a sense of belonging or connection without initially attending the program. Therefore, attendance also is an important issue (e.g., Anderson-Butcher, 2005). One must wonder, however, what amount of attendance is necessary to foster a sense of belonging and attachment to a program (and, in turn, foster the adoption of the agency/program's norms and values). Future research should begin exploring this issue, particularly as recent findings suggest that participants in youth service agencies establish strong, caring, youth-to-adult relationships with staff relatively quickly within these programs (Anderson-Butcher, Cash, Saltzburg, Midle, & Pace, 2004).

These data also found that as youths get older, they are more likely to be at risk for, and engage in, problem behaviors. These findings are similar to past research noting the positive relationship between age and the

display of problem behaviors (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2002; St. Pierre et al., 1997). As well, findings support the role of a sense of belonging to youth service agencies in combating increased risk. Therefore, engagement of older youths in youth service agencies and their programs would seem to be a potential way in which to combat the risks associated with increasing age. Engaging older youths may be quite challenging, however, as we know participation in youth development programs, sport, and other recreational activities among adolescents is much lower than among school-aged children (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Quinn, 1999). These older youths also may be less likely to fully engage in program activities. As Halpern et al. (2000) state, "(Older) youth used particular programs as respite, an occasional base or haven, never really getting involved in the life and the values of the program" (p. 510).

Continuing to explore vital recruitment and retention strategies among this hard-to-reach group is critical for the future of youth programming. For instance, studies have shown that the most influential people for young sport participants are their parents and siblings, while older youths are influenced more heavily by their peer group (Lewko & Greendorfer, 1988; McPherson & Brown, 1988). Thus, youth development programs must link their marketing, promotions, and programming not only to the participants themselves, but also to their family and friends. These recruitment and retention strategies must also be age-specific, particularly outreaching to youths as they age. This may, in turn, combat increasing risks commonly evident among older youths.

CONCLUSION

In building upon these ideas, future studies should attempt to assess the degree to which youth-development programs engage in these "belonging (identity) building" activities and determine which antecedents (including simply the examination of attendance thresholds) appear to be the most important in predicting belonging among different youth populations, particularly adolescents. Such information would be invaluable to youth-development administrators and leaders in attracting and keeping participants and, subsequently, in positively influencing their lives.

In sum, these study results suggest that a sense of belonging to a youth service agency, more importantly than attendance, is strongly related to enhanced protective factors and decreased risk and problem behaviors among participants involved in these agencies' programs. Program leaders working in youth development must further prioritize the development of a sense of belonging within their program designs. As they do so, it is expected that further positive outcomes for youths will occur. These designs are particularly important when working with older youths, as a sense of belonging may nullify the risks typically associated with increasing age.

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