Service-Learning in Emerging Adulthood: Positive Development and Outcomes

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Introduction

Emerging adulthood has been characterized as a stage of possibilities, exploration, and increased risk behavior (Arnett, 2000). Much of the research on emerging adulthood has focused on negative outcomes and risk behaviors (e.g., binge drinking, drug use, and risky sexual behavior) that commonly characterize emerging adulthood while less research has been conducted on positive development outcomes during this period (e.g., Padilla-Walker, Barry, Carroll, Madsen, & Nelson, 2007). Hence, more research is needed to explore positive development and outcomes during emerging adulthood including factors that might facilitate positive development. It is possible that service-learning experiences during emerging adulthood may provide a context in which positive development may occur.

Arnett (2000) has proposed a theory that identifies the time period from age 18 to the middle and late twenties as a distinct developmental period separate from adolescence and adulthood called emerging adulthood. He outlined five main features of this period:

1. The age of feeling in-between (emerging adults do not see themselves as either an adolescent or an adult)
2. The age of possibilities (emerging adults are optimistic and have high hopes for the future)
3. The age of instability (marked by instability in work, relationships, education, and residential status)
4. The age of identity explorations (emerging adults are free to explore identity in the areas of work, love, and worldviews)
5. The age of self-focus (emerging adults are not self-centered but rather free from social and other obligations that allow productive focus on the self)

Scholars have noted a significant variation and heterogeneity during emerging adulthood. Factors such as culture, educational level, and socioeconomic status (SES) influence specific variations in the five features of emerging adulthood (e.g., feeling in-between, possibilities, instability, identity, self-focused) (Nelson & Chen, 2007; Arnett, 2000). One factor that influences variation that has not been examined empirically is service-learning. Service-learning is defined as “any program that attempts to link academic study with service” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 5). Limited research on service-learning suggests that service-learning is linked to a myriad of positive outcomes, including increased personal and interpersonal growth, increased self-understanding, advanced critical thinking abilities, reduction of stereotypes, and increased tolerance (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

The current study qualitatively examined positive development and outcomes during emerging adulthood specifically in the context of service-learning experiences in the Romania International Internship program. We hypothesized that compared with emerging adults who do not participate in service-learning experiences, those who do participate develop more positive outcomes including (1) more positive self-perceptions, (2) greater identity development, and (3) achievement of criteria deemed necessary for adulthood.

Method

Participants in the sample included seven white, Caucasian undergraduate students (5 women, 2 men) ages 20-28 participating as interns in the Romania International Internship program in Iasi, Romania. Participants were recruited via class participation in the Romania International Internship preparation course prior to participants’ service-learning experience in Romania. Participants completed a battery of open-ended, free-response questions at three intervals (beginning, middle, and end of their internship) over the course of a four-month period. Each participant was given a flash drive that contained three documents (one for each data collection) that gave them instructions and the questions they were asked to answer each time.

Measures were designed to allow participants to provide open-ended responses in the areas deemed of interest in the study, including: (1) participants’ feelings about service, (2) attitudes about adult roles and skills necessary for adulthood, (3) participants’ outlook on the future, (4) identity development and self-perceptions, (5) self-focus, and (6) the stability and instability.

Results

Several themes emerged during data analysis, including (1) interpersonal skills, (2) personal skills, (3) identity exploration, (4) possibilities, and (5) perceptions of adulthood.

(1) Interpersonal Skills

Participants suggested that various interpersonal skills were learned during their service-learning experience. Several reported various lessons they learned including (1) working with others with different personalities, (2) working with different kinds of people, (3) how to be patient with others, and (4) communicating better. EXAMPLE: “One thing in particular I’ve learned is communication. I have realized that the number one reason people usually fight or don’t get along is because they are misunderstanding what the other person is saying or feeling, because of poor communication…you cannot have effective relationships if you cannot properly communicate with others and I believe my time in Romania has helped me to understand that principle more clearly.”

(2) Personal Skills

The emerging adults also reported learning various personal skills that helped them cope with the stress of the internship and would help them deal effectively with everyday life. Several reported using coping strategies as a means to cope with stress. In addition, the emerging adults expressed the desire and ability to do hard things as a result of their service-learning experience. EXAMPLES:

- “Over the course of the internship I have also found again my desire to do hard things. I don’t know if it was the internship or the timing nor am I totally where I feel I should be, but I have gained a greater desire to work hard and achieve my goals.”
- “I gained the abilities to deal with life. I can deal with the tragedies that happen in life with a smile on my face, and if not a smile, then at least a firm hope that all is well… I can deal with tragedy and roll with the punches that life will inevitably bring and do it in a calm manner without losing my head or becoming irrational.”

(3) Identity Exploration

Participants indicated that in large part, the service-learning did not challenge their beliefs but solidified, supported, and added to them. Participants reported some changes in their identities, including: (1) how the participants viewed themselves, (2) how important they felt spirituality and a relationship with Deity were, (3) how important they felt the institutions of family and family relationships were, and (4) development of a more other-oriented worldview. EXAMPLES:

- “The world is so much bigger than me and my personal problems. If I forget myself and soak myself in the lives of others and serving them, my life is better and I have more joy. I have gained the ability to think so much further beyond myself and to give.”

Discussion

In support of study hypotheses, responses from the emerging adults suggested that service-learning experiences during emerging adulthood do promote positive development and outcomes during this important developmental period. Why does service-learning matter? There may be several reasons, including:

1. The nature of everyday life doesn’t allow these types of growth.
2. Taking an emerging adult out of his/her normal environment for a service-learning experience creates an opportunity for growth.
3. Service-learning experience forces emerging adults to see the world as it really is and find what contributions they can make and where they fit in it.

Service-learning appears to be potentially extremely beneficial particularly in the context of emerging adulthood. Because emerging adulthood is a time of increased exploration and possibilities (Arnett, 2000), this may create a meaningful opportunity for emerging adults to (1) safely explore the world, (2) improve themselves, (3) understand what being an adult means, and (4) see all of the possibilities in their own lives.

References


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