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Mental Health and Wellbeing During the Transition to Adulthood

Doctor of Clinical Psychology

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Statement of Originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository**, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. **Unless an Embargo has been approved for a determined period.

Statement of Authorship

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis contains a manuscript submitted for publication, of which I am a joint author. Below is a written statement, endorsed by my supervisors, attesting to my contribution to the joint publication:

Emma Gallagher conceived of the study, participated in the design of the study, coordinated the study, performed the measurements, statistical analyses, interpretation of data, and drafted the manuscript; Linda E. Campbell conceived of the study, participated in the design of the study, participated in interpretation of data, and helped to draft the manuscript; Mick Hunter participated in the design of the study, participated in interpretation of data, and helped to draft the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.
I wish to thank my supervisors Linda Campbell and Mick Hunter for their support and dedication throughout this entire process. During the statistical analysis time of the project, Mick’s broad knowledge and years of research experience helped me to ‘find the story’ of the data, without which my thesis would not have been able to come together. It was Linda who originally gave me the opportunity to design and conduct a study that had real-world applications. She was there through the difficult months of recruitment problems and dragged me back kicking and screaming from my cave of thesis avoidance. More recently, she gave up hours of precious sleep to help me edit the final stages of my thesis. I am not a researcher by nature, and these last four and half years have been the best and worst of my life. Nevertheless they have got me to a place I have long dreamed of; working as a registered psychologist (soon to be Clinical Psychologist), helping adolescents and emerging adults transition through the difficult years and into a happy and healthy adulthood.

“What we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others and the world, is and remains immortal.”

— Albert Pine
Abstract

Scope. Studies have shown that the early years of adulthood tend to have a high incidence of mental health problems (Newman et al. 1996). Internalising disorders such as depression and anxiety are also large contributors to the total burden of disease in Australia (Begg et al. 2003). Numerous studies have attempted to investigate factors associated with depression in young adults, with the view of identifying groups in need of early intervention. Some studies have looked longitudinally to find that early childhood trauma, family instability and parental psychopathology have lasting impacts on mental health into adulthood (Frye and Liem 2011; Stoolmiller et al. 2005). Other studies have employed a more contextual approach. Factors such as current levels of social support and attachment style were identified as having protective effects against current depression levels (Pettit et al. 2011; Riggs and Han 2009). Despite the large body of work to date on young adult mental health, there remains a need for studies using multi-factorial models (Riggs and Han 2009). Purpose. One purpose of the current study was to replicate Arnett’s (1997; 2000) model of agreed criteria for adulthood. The second purpose of the study was to investigate potential links between depressive symptoms and psychological factors such as insight, self-reflection, positive social comparison, and coping ability while controlling for the potentially confounding variables of anxiety and hopelessness. Methodology. A sample of 127 mainly undergraduate university students (78%) completed an online survey. Data was first analysed in a hierarchical multiple linear regression before a path analysis was employed to create a model that best explained the direct and indirect links between observed variables. Results. The four most commonly endorsed criteria for adulthood came from factors relating to independence and biological transitions. The independence factors matched the results of Arnett’s (1997) study. The results of the study also showed that
after controlling for anxiety and hopelessness, there were positive associations between low depression levels and positive social comparison, insight, and norm compliance. Overall, insight was found to be the strongest individual predictor of mental wellbeing.

**Conclusions and Implications.** The present study highlights the importance of considering internal factors in the investigation of predictors of young adult mental health. Future studies would benefit from including such an approach when exploring structural predictors to assist in identifying at-risk groups. The implication of focusing on internal factors, and in particular the finding that insight levels play an important role in young adult mental health, is the possibility of targeted clinical interventions. Such interventions could dramatically improve the health, wellbeing, and future of young adults.
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