

Nontraditional paths toward successful life outcomes for at-risk youth: A prospective, longitudinal, multi-sample approach

CONTEXT

The path toward successful adult adjustment is not always straightforward. Youth who have experienced familial, behavioral or academic difficulties may find it particularly difficult to achieve a fulfilling adult life situation. This research project aims to identify and understand nontraditional paths to successful outcomes in adulthood in 3 complementary samples of at-risk youth, using mixed methods. At-risk youth are individuals who have grown up in difficult contexts due to limited socioeconomic resources, suboptimal parenting practices, or individual vulnerabilities (e.g., low academic competence, behavior difficulties). If low-risk youth are more likely to experience positive outcomes in adulthood (e.g., graduation, secure employment, positive family and civic engagement), at-risk youth can still reach these goals, often following nontraditional paths.

OBJECTIVES

- (1) Identify and predict nontraditional paths--identify subgroups of participants displaying nontraditional paths toward successful life outcomes and establish their prevalence in 3 samples. Determine the predictors of nontraditional paths; examine gender differences in pathways and replicability across samples.
- (2) Describe the mechanisms involved in nontraditional paths--among participants following nontraditional paths, identify mediation chains explaining how they have reached successful outcomes. Determine the moderators of the link between predictors and outcomes.
- (3) Uncover new portraits of resiliency--using qualitative material from semi-structured interviews, identify new, unsuspected nontraditional paths, and verify whether these paths are consistent across samples. Make recommendations to include unsuspected nontraditional paths in both policy studies and future research.

ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

We need to identify the mechanisms through which at-risk youth who did not follow a traditional path through adult life have nevertheless become successful in adulthood. Such information is critical to help decision-makers support other disadvantaged youth in reaching successful outcomes using channels that are not officially a part of the regular educational curriculum.

METHOD

Using 3 longitudinal samples from different age groups (early 20s to 50–60 years old), we will implement cross-sample comparisons to cross-validate and nuance our results, moving beyond what can be done with a single sample. We will combine new data, collected from online questionnaires and phone interviews, with information from previous waves of collection. State-of-the art quantitative analyses (SPSS and Mplus software) will help reach objectives 1 and 2: latent class modeling, multinomial regressions with indirect effects / interactions, conducted with full information maximum

likelihood to handle missing values and multilevel modeling to control for nested data. Template analysis will be applied to the content of semi-structured interviews (NVivo software) to reach objective 3.

ADVANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE

Resiliency and life-course theories guide our timely research questions to help understand the critical developmental issue of alternative paths to success. In turn, we will make conceptual contributions to resiliency theory by identifying different profiles of nontraditional paths toward successful adult outcomes for youth who encountered adversity, and to life-course theory by pinpointing mechanisms that can channel at-risk youth away from maladjustment and towards successful outcomes at different points in adulthood.

BROADER BENEFITS

This project will enable us to make recommendations on how to empower youth who have faced adversity to grow as accomplished citizens. Promoting nontraditional paths to success can increase the number of at-risk youth who can contribute to society.