The Roles of Resilience and Belonging in Mediating the Association Between Positivity and Anxiety Among Underrepresented Minority College Students

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Background

On a large university campus, students that come from underrepresented minority backgrounds are exposed to unique stressors that put them at greater risk for developing anxiety disorders in comparison with traditional college attendees. These risks can be heightened for students categorized as racial/ethnic, gender, medically disabled, or socioeconomic class-based minorities.

Students who are the first in their family to attend college, first-generation students (FGS), make up 34–40% of first-year/freshmen cohorts at U.S. universities, and are the fastest growing subgroup of underrepresented students on college campuses.

In Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions broaden one’s thought-action repertoire, where over time, more experiences of positive emotions build psychological (e.g., resilience) and social (e.g., belonging) resources that can assist undergraduate students in facing and successfully coping with the inevitable stressful demands of academic life.

The present study hypothesized the following:

[H1]: Positivity will be directly negatively associated with levels of generalized anxiety.

[H2]: Resilience will partially mediate the negative association between positivity and generalized anxiety.

[H3]: Belonging will partially mediate the negative association between positivity and generalized anxiety.

Methods

Data Analysis: Hierarchical multiple regression examined the association between positivity and generalized anxiety, and the mediating roles of resilience and sense of belonging. Demographics (age, sex, race/ethnicity, 1st generation status, living on/off campus) were included as covariates.

Measures:

- Positivity: 20-item Modified Differential Emotions Scale
- Anxiety: 7-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale
- Resilience: 6-item Brief Resilience Scale
- Belonging: 8-item Social Connectedness Scale

Results

Positivity was negatively associated with anxiety directly [H1] (b = -.435, p < .001) and indirectly through resilience [H2] (b = -.088, p < .001), but not through sense of belonging [H3] (b = -.045, p > .05).

Although positivity was significantly associated with sense of belonging (b = .611, p < .001), sense of belonging was not associated with anxiety (b = .074, p > .05).

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Continuous Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>19.06 (1.60)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>62.04 (14.52)</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>3.39 (.73)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.47***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>27.88 (8.02)</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.60***</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>8.53 (5.60)</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.57***</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td>-.42***</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < .001.

Discussion

This study supports the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions as a useful framework for examining the association between positivity and generalized anxiety as well as the mediating role of psychological resilience between positivity and anxiety in underrepresented minority college students.

Given the vulnerability of underrepresented minority college students, work in this area should continue to explore and provide additional support for the intentional design of educational resources to enhancing psychological resilience and positive health outcomes in this population.

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