



Negative Life Events and Psychological Distress among Young Adults

Author(s): Pamela Braboy Jackson and Montenique Finney

Source: *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Jun., 2002), pp. 186-201

Published by: [American Sociological Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3090100>

Accessed: 11/11/2013 16:49

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



American Sociological Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Psychology Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Negative Life Events and Psychological Distress Among Young Adults*

PAMELA BRABOY JACKSON
Indiana University

MONTENIQUE FINNEY
Ohio State University

This study examines the relationship between college career stage, negative life events, and psychological distress. Young adults enrolled in three universities completed a survey, which included a life events inventory and several psychological distress scales (depression, anxiety, anger/hostility). As expected, negative experiences in affiliative opportunities (peer relationships) were most predictive of distress; younger students were vulnerable to negative life events across domains. Surprisingly, younger students were more likely than older students to be angry/hostile (rather than consistently depressed or anxious) about negative life events. We believe that younger adults either lack the psychological resources of maturity and experience or adopt ineffective coping strategies when faced with stressful situations.

In this article we investigate the extent to which negative events in particular domains of life are related to psychological distress among young adults. We hypothesize that events related to affiliative opportunities (peer relationships) will be most predictive of distress. We explore the impact of negative life events on several measures of distress, since certain stressors may trigger different stress reactions. In addition, this study supplements life events research by considering the possibility that maturity buffers the psychological impact of negative life events (vulnerability hypothesis). Whereas the arguments set forth in much of that research rely on studies of middle-aged and older adults, we use a sample of college students to test these hypotheses.

BACKGROUND

College Career Stage

College career stage is used in this study as a proxy for emotional maturity. Maturity has been considered a resource in some areas

of research. Mirowsky and Ross (1992), for example, in examining the relationship between age and depression, found that middle-aged adults are less depressed than young adults. They conclude, "young adults seem to benefit psychologically from getting older" (p. 202). In this study we explore age-based vulnerability across the college career.

In general, students progress during their college years; thus they achieve a certain level of cognitive, emotional, and intellectual development. Development often involves learning specific skills such as problem solving, taking the perspective of others, and role playing (Chickering and Reisser 1993). Research suggests that as students move from one academic level to the next (e.g., freshman to sophomore year) they grow more autonomous (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991), become at ease with their self-identities (Redmore 1983), demonstrate greater academic competence (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991), and acquire more impulse control, which helps them manage their emotions (Chickering and Reisser 1993).

Ego development among first-year students is also clearly different from that of older students. Weathersby (1981) contends that most traditional-age college students begin at the conformist or self-aware stage, where their interpersonal style is dominated

* This research was funded with grants awarded to the first author from the Arts and Sciences Research Council of Duke University 1995 and 1996. Please direct all correspondence to P.B. Jackson, Department of Sociology, Ballantine Hall 774, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405-7103; e-mail: pjackson@indiana.edu.

by a concern about belonging and by a tendency to try to be nice to everyone. It is not clear when students emerge from this initial stage, but comfort with self increases as they settle into the campus routine. Anecdotal research suggests that through experience over the course of the college career, students are more confident in themselves when they enter their final year (Chickering and Reisser 1993). By that time, they have developed an adequate set of behaviors and have discovered coping patterns that are consistent with their ages.

The stage at which life events occur is, therefore, important because events can serve as turning points and can modify life trajectories (Pancer et al. 2000). Without proper guidance or a source of social comparison, students may blame themselves for events and may decide to restrict their opportunities for advancement or limit their life experiences. For example, being rejected by a social club may lead to a depressed mood when it occurs early in the undergraduate career rather than later, when the student is immersed in other aspects of college life. Although a single event may not be appraised as stressful, the accumulation of multiple problems within a particular domain often leads to feelings of helplessness.

In addition, expectations of students are often imposed upon them on the basis of their year in college. Because the demarcation between college stages (e.g., freshman to sophomore) can be a function of factors other than level of maturity or experience (e.g., number of college credits earned), we compare young adults who are in the earlier stages of their undergraduate college careers with those who are at the end of their college careers. We consider seniors (fourth- or fifth-year students) to have reached the highest level of maturity or to have acquired the greatest amount of relevant experience.

Life Events

The most productive area of research on stressful experiences in young adult populations focuses on the psychological impact of life events. Exposure to many life events is related to poor psychological adjustment (for a review, see Sandin et al. 1998). Events that

are viewed as undesirable, uncontrollable, and unpredictable are especially distressing.

Although events have been measured on multiple dimensions, desirability is more strongly related to psychological distress than are controllability and predictability (Thoits 1983). In fact, the subjective appraisal of an event as negative (rather than the rating by an outside evaluator) is most predictive of distress. Social psychologists have long recognized that distress is predicted by the perception and the interpretation of events rather than by the occurrence of events themselves (Thomas 1966). Although we acknowledge that a comprehensive examination of the effects of events on distress would consider each of these dimensions, we focus here on the evaluative component (desirability) of life events.

Past research has shown that adolescents are exposed to a variety of stressors, which typically occur in different domains of life (Hirsch 1985; Hirsch and Jolly 1984). The areas that have been identified as particularly stress-provoking are school, interpersonal relationships, finances, sexual coercion, and deviance (Archer and Lamnin 1985; Makepeace 1981, 1983; Newcomb, Huba, and Bentler 1981).

Although an array of events may be stressful, interpersonal relationships may pose the greatest challenge for young adults. Some of the most important developmental tasks for young people involve constructing identities and sustaining intimate relationships (Erikson 1950, 1968). In fact, developing close relationships with others is a central concern for most people. Social psychologists have examined a variety of motives that prompt us to seek out social contact: the desire to associate with others has been linked to the *need for affiliation*, the *need for social comparison*, and the *need for intimacy*.

The need for affiliation is the desire to establish and maintain rewarding interpersonal relationships. Affiliation with others helps in turn to fulfill the need for social comparison, in which we depend on others for information about the social and physical world around us. The longing for close, communicative relationships is called the need for intimacy (McAdams 1982).

The psychological needs for affiliation, social comparison, and intimacy are fulfilled by the presence of others. Studies clearly demonstrate that fear is often reduced when others who are in a similar position are present (Shaver and Klinnert 1982). Individuals who are in the same situation may provide comfort, consolation, and reassurance; young adults entering into a new college environment are prime candidates for such affiliations.

Because young adults have a strong desire to belong (Rosenthal et al. 1997), we believe that peer relationships will generate the highest stressful response. Various issues often surface during the course of a personal relationship. For example, those who enter into a relationship may need to invest resources (e.g., time, money) in order to sustain the relationship. Serious conflicts also can occur in close friendships and meaningful romantic attachments. Stress is triggered when relationships are developing and when they end. In this study, we view relationship issues as involving both formation and dissolution of intimate ties.

Many areas of stress have been considered in past research. With the increase in ethnic diversity on college campuses, however, young people also are dealing with issues of race and problems of racism (Cabrera et al. 1999). Hate crimes on school grounds continue to receive increasing attention; such violence often ranges from "blatant physical attacks and property damage to subtle harassment (both in and out of the classroom), to name-calling and insults" (Schuman and Olufs 1995:187). Nonminority students also face the possibility of racial attacks. As a result of these changing dynamics, our study includes an index of life events that assesses race relations.

Psychological Distress

Much of the research on life events has focused on depression as the outcome of interest. In fact, exposure to many life events increases the risk of depression. Studies consistently reveal, however, that women report higher rates of depression than men: gender differences in depression have been found in adolescent and adult populations (Kandel,

Simcha-Fagan, and Davies 1986; Nolen-Hoeksema 1987, 1990; Weissman et al. 1984). Although some scholars believe that gender differences in depression indicate women's greater vulnerability to stress, others attribute this pattern to women's greater reporting of affective symptoms. In support of this position, research indicates that men are more likely than women to develop symptoms of alcoholism, drug abuse, and antisocial personality disorder (Aneshensel, Rutter, and Lachenbruch 1991; Horwitz, White and Howell-White 1996). Stress investigators thus emphasize the importance of considering both internalized and externalized outcomes in studies of stress. Accordingly, we consider female-type disorders (depression and anxiety) and a male-type disorder (anger/hostility) in this study.¹

In contrast to the traditional indicators of psychological distress (e.g., depression and alcohol abuse), less attention has been devoted to the relationship between life events and anger. Social psychologists have long considered anger within theories of emotional development. Many investigators focus on emotional socialization; others describe the historical changes in anger control (for a review, see Thoits 1989). Regardless of the emphasis placed on anger expression, anger is a problematic emotion when it leads to aggression or other antisocial behaviors. In studies of young adults, it has been identified as a relatively common response to negative situations (Aseltine, Gore, and Gordon 2000; Chickering and Reisser 1993).

Many social psychologists view anger as an emotional reaction rather than a mood state. *Hostility* is the label generally adopted by stress investigators interested in this type of emotion. Yet the boundaries between anger as an emotion and hostility as a mood state are tenuous. As Thoits (1984:233) notes, "[P]sychological disturbance might be reconceptualized usefully as persistent or recurrent emotional disturbance or, in extreme forms, as emotional deviance." The intricacies of these emotion labels cannot be disentangled.

¹ Although we consider female- and male-type disorders, we do not present separate regression models for women and for men in the body of the paper. Those results are available on request.

gled in this study. Here we adopt the term *anger/hostility* to represent both the emotion and the hostile behaviors that this emotion can evoke. We believe that as young people mature, they learn appropriate strategies for channeling their anger/hostility.

We first consider the relationship between college career stage and exposure to negative life events. In general, younger students will probably report fewer such events because they have had less time to experience life events in general. We then explore the extent to which younger adults (those in the early stages of their college careers) are more disposed to psychological distress than their older peers. We also pay particular attention to the area of stress that is most predictive of distress. Finally, we examine the hypothesis that college career stage is an effective psychological buffer against negative life events (the vulnerability hypothesis). In doing so, we build on research assessing the psychological impact of life stress in young adult populations (see Aseltine et al. 2000).

METHODS

Respondents

In this study we use data from a survey of young adults enrolled in three universities located in the southeast. Approximately 863 undergraduates were recruited from university classrooms during the 1996 academic year. The initial sample consisted of 480 females and 380 males (three missing cases), and included 20.4 percent freshmen, 28.9 percent sophomores, 29.1 percent juniors, and 20.7 percent seniors (.9 percent were graduate students). The distribution of students (in terms of college career stage) is representative of the undergraduate student populations at each university. Because older students are likely to have extended life experiences, which may mask the effects of events on emotional well-being, only traditional-aged students are included in this analysis. Participation in this study was not contingent upon fulfillment of a course requirement.

The sample consists of 49.8 percent white, 42.6 percent African American, 4.4 percent Asian American, 2.0 percent Hispanic, and 1.2 percent Native American

students. This ethnic diversity allows for a more general assessment of the impact of life stress on psychological well-being than did previous studies. Many investigators have been plagued with the problem of homogeneity in young respondents' ethnic background, reporting fewer than 10 percent of the sample as members of minority groups (e.g., see Aseltine et al. 2000). The final sample includes an ethnically diverse group of traditional-aged respondents who completed each of the psychological distress scales ($N = 667$).

Procedures

Respondents were asked to volunteer as participants in a survey study; those who chose not to participate were not penalized. Approximately 95 percent of the students enrolled in sampled classes completed the questionnaire. After signing an informed consent letter, respondents were given a self-report questionnaire during the class session and were seated far enough apart to maximize chances of complete privacy.

The researcher began by giving a brief introduction to the study. Respondents were told that they could ask questions at any time. The respondents then were asked to remain in their seats until the entire class had completed the questionnaire; completion took an average of 40 minutes. Finally, the respondents were debriefed.

Measures

College career stage/year in school. Respondents were asked their current class standing (e.g., freshman, sophomore). Three dummy variables are adopted to represent this variable; seniors are used as the comparison category in the regression models (0 = seniors).²

Life events. Respondents completed a scale adapted from the instruments developed by Newcomb and colleagues (1981), and other indices developed for student populations (see Sarason, Johnson, and Siegel 1978). Fifty items were included in the life

² We also considered respondent's age in the model but found that it did not predict psychological distress.

events index (see Appendix A). Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had experienced each event over the course of their college careers. If the event had occurred, they were instructed to evaluate it as positive (coded 0) or negative (coded 1). This *self-appraisal* component of the life events inventory was used to construct the life event scales used in this study. We created six indices to represent different areas of stress: (1) school (e.g., failed a test), (2) family relations (e.g., parents divorced), (3) affiliative opportunities (e.g., broke up with boyfriend/girlfriend), (4) race relations (e.g., called by a racial slur), (5) deviance (e.g., got in trouble with the law), and (6) physical assault (e.g., was raped). High scores represent the occurrence of many negative events in a particular area.

*Psychological distress.*³ We included three measures of distress in the study. Depression is measured with a subscale of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Radloff 1975, 1977). These 12 items assess the self-reported frequency of depressive symptoms experienced over the past week. The items are summed to form the scale. High scores indicate high levels of depression (range: 0–84). This scale does not measure a clinical disorder, but it is a highly reliable ($\alpha = .89$) and valid measure of depressive symptoms (Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber 1983). Previous research indicated strong internal consistency (Roberts 1980) and good discriminatory power in clinical subsamples (Boyd and Weissman 1982; Weissman and Klerman 1977).

Anxiety and anger/hostility measures were drawn from the Structured Interview Schedule (SIS) and are similar to the items in the Symptom Check List-90-R (SCL-90-R) (Derogatis 1977; Derogatis, Lipman, and Covi 1973). Respondents were asked whether they saw themselves in a certain way (0 = no, 1 = yes). Eight items were summed to form the anxiety scale (range: 0–8). Five

items were summed to create the anger/hostility scale (range: 0–5). These scales are reliable, valid measures of psychological distress in community samples. The respective Cronbach's alphas are .68 and .71. These coefficients are acceptable and similar to those reported in other studies (see Rosenfield 1980). (Individual scale items for the psychological distress scales are presented in Appendix B).

Control variables. Control variables included gender (0 = male, 1 = female) and race/ethnicity (0 = nonwhite, 1 = white). In keeping with prior research on young adult samples (e.g., see Wickrama et al. 1999), we use father's education as an indicator of social class standing (1 = less than high school, 2 = high school diploma, 3 = some college, 4 = college degree). Type of college is included as a partial control for social context, which has been linked to students' performance and well-being (Babbitt, Burbach, and Thompson 1975; Lyons 1973). We created dummy variables comparing students who attended private universities (coded 0) with students at public universities (coded 1). Other life events that did not fall within a particular area were included as a separate summed measure in the regression equations.

Analytic Strategy

An implicit component of the theoretical model links college career stage to the experience of life events. Therefore we begin by regressing our area-specific life events on college career stage. We then use OLS regression to estimate the relationship between college career stage, negative life events, and psychological distress. Unstandardized regression coefficients are presented to convey the full impact of the different areas of stress on psychological well-being; standardized regression coefficients represent the relative impact of life events.

In the final stage of the analysis, we include three interaction terms in each regression model to test the vulnerability hypothesis. These terms are created by multiplying the college career stage variables by an area-specific event index. We examine each set of interaction terms in separate regression equations to reduce multi-

³ We also explored the relationship between negative life events and alcohol problems. Because a number of respondents reported never having taken a drink of alcohol ($N = 203$), we do not report these findings here. The results from this subanalysis are available on request.

collinearity (Agresti and Finlay 1986). In the interaction models, a positive coefficient indicates that younger participants are more severely distressed in response to events than are their older peers. A positive coefficient supports the vulnerability hypothesis.⁴ Because we found so few main effects of college career stage (year in college) or life events in those equations where interaction terms were statistically significant (a total of four), we do not present the full regression models. Even so, we interpret these interaction terms in designated footnotes with reference to the main effects.

In this study, we use cross-sectional data to explore the relationship between negative life events and psychological distress; therefore, we cannot determine whether previous states of distress alter the appraisal of life events. Past research estimated the relationship between life events and psychological distress using longitudinal data on young people (high school and college students); the model in this study is consistent with the findings from that research (see Aseltine et al. 2000). Although we are fairly confident about our results, the cross-sectional design employed here places limitations on their interpretation. In other words, the patterns reported may be inflated if psychological impairment precedes the occurrence of life events.⁵

RESULTS

College Career Stage and Negative Life Events⁶

Table 1 reports the results from six models estimating the impact of college career

stage on area-specific life events, with the control variables held constant. As shown, first-year students are less likely than seniors to report family-related events. Second-year students are less likely than seniors to report problems in affiliative opportunities and physical assault. We found few differences between third-year students and seniors in the reporting of life events.

Hypothesis 1: College Career Stage Predicts Distress

We conducted multiple regression analyses to examine the independent effects of college career stage (i.e., year in college) and exposure to negative life events on psychological distress, holding constant the control variables. Table 2 shows regression results for these models.

In keeping with our hypothesis, we found that year in college predicts depression and anger/hostility. First-year students are more depressed than seniors ($p < .05$); sophomores are somewhat more angry/hostile than seniors ($p < .10$). We found few differences between third-year students and seniors in reports of psychological distress.

Hypothesis 2: Affiliative Opportunities Matter More

As shown in Table 2, most of the areas of stress help explain psychological distress in this sample of young adults. Young people who report difficulties at school are somewhat more depressed than their peers ($p < .10$). Negative experiences within the family predict higher anxiety ($p < .10$). Affiliative opportunities are related to higher depression ($p < .001$), anxiety ($p < .001$), and anger/hostility ($p < .001$) among young adults. Neither race relations⁷ nor deviance-related problems are associated with psychological distress. Young people who have been physically assaulted are more anxious ($p < .01$) and more angry/hostile

⁴ In Appendix C we summarize the type of events reported by adolescents who are at different stages of their college careers (events mentioned by at least 50 percent of the sample). The design of this study is cross-sectional, but if a longitudinal design were employed, one might hypothesize that students experience particular events as they progress through their college careers.

⁵ We also used LISREL to estimate the model using the unscaled items. These results indicate a better fit of the data when events predict distress. For ease of presentation, the OLS results are presented throughout the paper.

⁶ Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of the major study variables are presented in Appendix Table A1.

⁷ As suggested by an anonymous reviewer, the impact of race relations may depend on the student's race/ethnicity, the type of school (e.g., private or public), and the racial composition of the school (e.g., predominantly white). We explored this possibility and found some interesting results, which are available on request.

Table 1. OLS Regressions of Area-Specific Life Events on College Career Stage

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables					
	School	Family	Aff. Opp.	Race Rel.	Deviance	P.Asslt.
College Career Stage ^a						
First year	-.15 (-.05)	-.43** (-.14)	-.16 (-.08)	.00 (.00)	-.05 (-.02)	-.06 (-.06)
Second year	-.00 (-.01)	-.13 (-.05)	-.21* (-.11)	-.00 (-.03)	.08 (.05)	-.08† (-.09)
Third year	-.00 (-.00)	-.00 (-.01)	-.00 (-.01)	-.00 (-.00)	-.00 (-.00)	-.06 (-.06)
Control Variables						
Female	-.31*** (-.13)	.33*** (.13)	.17** (.10)	-.08** (-.11)	-.43*** (-.29)	.09** (.11)
White	-.24** (-.10)	-.00 (-.01)	.12† (.07)	-.00 (-.04)	-.17** (-.11)	.07* (.08)
Father's education	.00 (.04)	-.12* (-.09)	-.00 (-.00)	-.00 (-.00)	.00 (.01)	-.00 (-.03)
Public university	.28** (.11)	-.17† (-.07)	-.00 (-.03)	-.00 (-.03)	.14* (.09)	-.03 (-.03)
Other events	.19*** (.40)	.16*** (.32)	.07*** (.24)	.03*** (.26)	.08*** (.32)	.03*** (.23)
Intercept	1.03***	1.21***	.37*	.12	.28†	
R ²	.22	.17	.09	.08	.22	.08

Note: Table reports unstandardized coefficients with standardized coefficients in parentheses.

^a Seniors are comparison category.

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

($p < .05$) than their peers who have not experienced these events. Although we found support for our second hypothesis, we underestimated the impact of physical assault on feelings of distress.

Hypothesis 3: Young Adults Are More Vulnerable to Negative Life Events

Table 3 presents a summary of the results from the regression models testing the vulnerability hypothesis. Again, these models examined the effects of the interaction between college career stage (i.e., year in school) and each area of life event stress on psychological distress. (We estimated a total of 18 models.) Those relationships which were statistically significant in the models predicting psychological distress are represented by the significance level of the actual coefficient. We found support for the vulnerability hypothesis, but only within particular stress domains and only for certain segments of the young adult sample.⁸

First-year students are vulnerable to five of the six area-related stressors. Those who

report exposure to stress in school and race relations⁹ are more depressed than older students who report these events. These young people also are more anxious about race relations than their peers. And finally, first-year students who have problems with affiliative opportunities, race relations, deviance,¹⁰ and physical assault are angrier than other college students who are not faced with these problems.

Second-year students are vulnerable to four of the six area-related stressors, but only in regard to feelings of anger/hostility. Those in their second year of college who have faced negative experiences in school, family,

⁹ The main effect of the race-relations index reached statistical significance in the interaction model ($p < .05$) predicting depression. In an examination of the prediction equations comparing first-year students with seniors, we found a higher slope between depression and race-related events for first-year students, as well as a larger effect of an increase in race-related events on depression.

¹⁰ The main effect of deviance-related events reached statistical significance in the interaction model ($p < .10$) predicting anger/hostility. In an examination of the prediction equations comparing first-year students with seniors, we found a slightly lower slope between anger and these events for first-year students. Yet we found a larger effect of an increase in

⁸ The number of significant interaction terms exceeds the number expected as a result of chance alone ($p < .05$).

Table 2. OLS Regressions of Psychological Distress on Area-Specific Life Events and Control Variables

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables		
	Depression	Anxiety	Anger
College Career Stage ^a			
First year	3.21* (.10)	.26 (.06)	.15 (.07)
Second year	1.64 (.05)	.15 (.04)	.18† (.09)
Third year	.31 (.01)	.11 (.02)	.08 (.04)
Exposure to Life Events			
School	.78† (.07)	.03 (.02)	.00 (.00)
Family	.61 (.05)	.11† (.07)	.02 (.03)
Affiliative opport.	4.05*** (.24)	.30*** (.13)	.17*** (.15)
Race relations	-.11 (-.00)	-.02 (-.01)	.08 (.03)
Deviance	-.11 (-.01)	-.15 (-.06)	.05 (.04)
Physical assault	.33 (.01)	.54** (.11)	.16* (.07)
Control Variables			
Female	.41 (.01)	.01 (.00)	-.32*** (-.17)
White	-2.36* (-.08)	-.03 (-.01)	-.07 (-.03)
Father's education	.23 (.01)	.04 (.02)	-.06 (-.06)
Public university	1.79 (.06)	.21 (.05)	.08 (.04)
Other events	2.28** (.11)	.25* (.09)	.00 (.00)
Intercept	12.11***	1.35**	.49*
R ²	.13	.07	.08

Note: Table reports unstandardized coefficients with standardized coefficients in parentheses.

^a Seniors are comparison category

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

affiliative opportunities, and deviance¹¹ report higher levels of anger/hostility than their older peers who experience these problems.

Third-year students are vulnerable to three areas of stress. Those who have problems in school¹² are more depressed than

older students who have these problems; those facing problems in their peer relationships (affiliative opportunities) are angrier than their older peers who are dealing with relationship problems; and those who say they faced negative experiences in race relations are angrier than their older peers.

deviance-related events on anger for the first-year students.

¹¹ The main effect of deviance-related events reached statistical significance in the interaction model ($p < .10$) predicting anger/hostility. In an examination of the prediction equations comparing second-year students with seniors, we found a slightly higher slope between anger and these events, for second-year students, as well as a larger effect of an increase in deviance-related events on anger.

¹² The main effect of third year in college reached

statistical significance in the interaction model ($p < .10$) predicting depression. In an examination of the prediction equations comparing the effects of different levels of these events (0–3, for example) on third-year students, we found that the effect of school-related events is most dramatic at the higher ends of the scale. In fact, the negative effect of school-related events is felt most strongly by third-year students who experienced two or more of these events.

Table 3. Summary of Interaction Terms Between College Career Stage and Area-Specific Life Events on Psychological Distress

	College Career Stage ^a								
	First Year			Second Year			Third Year		
	DEP	ANX	ANG	DEP	ANX	ANG	DEP	ANX	ANG
Area-Specific Life Events									
School	$p < .10$	—	—	—	—	$p < .05$	$p < .05$	—	—
Family	—	—	—	—	—	$p < .01$	—	—	—
Affiliative opport.	—	—	$p < .01$	—	—	$p < .001$	—	—	$p < .01$
Race relations	$p < .001$	$p < .05$	$p < .05$	—	—	—	—	—	$p < .10$
Deviance	—	—	$p < .001$	—	—	$p < .05$	—	—	—
Physical assault	—	—	$p < .05$	—	—	—	—	—	—

Notes: DEP = depression; ANX = anxiety; ANG = anger/hostility.

— refers to coefficients that were not statistically significant.

^a Seniors are comparison category.

CONCLUSIONS

Young adults are sensitive to area-specific stress, as suggested by previous studies (Aseltine, Gore, and Colten 1994; Mechanic and Hansell 1989; Vredenburg, O'Brien, and Krames 1988). Problems in intimate relationships are among those reported most frequently by college students (Archer and Lamnin 1985). We found that young people exposed to these negative experiences report more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and anger/hostility. Regardless of year in college, problems with peers continue to influence young people's psychological health (Kandel and Davies 1982).

Relationships may pose the greatest challenge for emotional development because people can offer or deny their friendship. Forming relationships with others increases the possibility of rejection: the 1998 shooting spree by Luke Woodham at Pearl High School centered on a breakup with a girlfriend. Although friends can be a source of tension, the vast literature on social support demonstrates that friends also can be important sources of comfort in the time of stressful life conditions (e.g., see Jackson 1992). Young people may become wary of developing intimate relationships with others, but the healing process includes seeking support from peers.

Life events regarding race relations place a psychological burden primarily on young adults in their first year of college. Few studies examine the impact of this potential stressor among young adults (for an exception, see Cabrera et al. 1999). Again, racial tension on college campuses is not new, and the psychological effects of prejudice and discrimination for African Americans and whites extend into adulthood (Forman, Williams, and Jackson 1997; Williams, Yu, and Jackson 1997). These early experiences with prejudice may inspire young people to develop a repertoire of coping strategies that they can activate if such stressful situations arise later in life.

Problems with the law, referred to as *deviance*, are also related to feelings of anger/hostility among younger adults. These events probably elicit the most negative self-image, especially if the actions directed at the

person are not warranted (if one is being followed around a store by a store clerk, for example).

Similarly, being physically accosted has direct implications for self-esteem and feelings of mastery. These traumatic events may be relived in painful memories and a general disinterest in daily life. "Hardy" adults, or those who take direct action against problems, may be better prepared to deal with such a trauma. We did not consider the psychosocial resources that young people may bring to stressful situations, but physical assault is related to increased anxiety regardless of year in college.

The results in this study suggest that younger adults may not be adopting effective coping strategies. On the basis of a post hoc examination exploring how these young people say they cope with stress, we found that a higher percentage of seniors report facing problems squarely and doing something about them, whereas their younger peers are more likely to say that they try to relax and not let things bother them (data not shown). This passive approach is not very useful in addressing practical problems. A longitudinal design would be the most definitive way to determine whether young people use different coping strategies across the life course.

Our findings speak to two general areas of social psychological research: emotions and human development. Although anger represents only one facet of the emotional experience, it can be quite perilous. Anger has both a physiological and a cognitive component: being angry can result in physical health problems (Everson et al. 1998), and anger has been linked to suicide attempts by adolescents (Boergers, Spirito, and Donaldson 1998; Goldston et al. 1996).

Emotions such as anger, however, also can serve a positive function: to prepare us for action. Perhaps young adults who become angry/hostile enough about social problems, such as poor race relations or physical assault, will be moved to respond and change the situation. By focusing on the effects of stress exposure and vulnerability on the expression of anger among young adults, we obtain one view of how emotions operate in everyday life.

Some level of development apparently occurs over the college career; this finding is consistent with other research on careers. Work and family careers also appear to stabilize and become less stressful with age (Pearlin and Lieberman 1979). Many competent older adults who now solve problems successfully on their jobs and in their intimate relationships were once first-year students who depended on others to help them resolve their crises. For social psychologists, this paper provides further evidence of the developmental dimension of the stress process.

Although our findings are consistent with previous research, we do not wish to overstate them. The interpretation of the findings is limited by the inability to establish a clear causal relationship between life events and psychological distress among young adults in this study. It remains to be seen whether psychological impairment predicts selection into categories of high stress due to events. Nonetheless, our results are consistent with the broader literature on stress and mental health. Negative events produce psychological distress; maturity, insofar as it comes with age, offsets their harmful effects.

Appendix A. Life Events Subscales

(0 = not negative; 1 = negative)

School

- Accused of cheating in class
- Changed schools
- Unprepared for an exam
- Failed a class
- Got in trouble at school
- Met a teacher I liked a lot
- Turned in assignment late
- Made all As one semester

Family

- Parents divorced
- Family accident or illness
- Death in family
- Parents argued or fought
- Family moved
- Parent abused drugs
- Parent remarried

Affiliative Opportunities

- Started dating regularly
- Fell in love
- Found a new group of friends
- Joined a club
- Broke up with boy/girlfriend
- Lost best friend
- Rejected by a club

Race Relations

- Was called a racial slur (e.g., nigger, cracker)
- Made a friend who is not of the same race
- Was called a racist

Deviance

- Stole something valuable
- Got in trouble with the law
- Hassled by police (or a security guard)
- Followed by store clerk

Physical/Criminal Assault

- Was raped by a stranger
- Was raped by an acquaintance
- Was physically assaulted
- Was stalked by a stranger
- Was stalked by an acquaintance

Appendix B. Psychological Distress Measures

Depression

On how many days (0-7) during the past week did you

1. Feel bothered by things that usually don't bother you?
2. Not feel like eating; your appetite was poor?
3. Feel that you could not shake off the blues even with help from family or friends?
4. Have trouble keeping your mind on what you were doing?
5. Feel depressed?
6. Feel that everything you did was an effort?
7. Feel fearful?
8. Sleep restlessly?
9. Talk less than usual?
10. Feel lonely?
11. Feel sad?
12. Feel you could not get going?

Next are some questions about how you see yourself.
(0 = item not checked; 1 = item checked)

Anxiety

- | | % |
|--|------|
| 1. Bothered by special fears | 33.3 |
| 2. Bothered by nervousness | 26.7 |
| 3. The worrying type | 50.1 |
| 4. Bothered by nightmares | 9.9 |
| 5. Feel anxiety about something or someone almost all the time | 38.2 |
| 6. Have high tension levels | 32.6 |
| 7. Often take sleeping pills or other drugs to calm down or for problems in sleeping | 4.2 |
| 8. Have periods of restlessness | 32.1 |

Anger/Hostility

- | | |
|--|------|
| 1. Feel angry or furious much of the time | 8.9 |
| 2. Want to harm someone | 7.9 |
| 3. Have visible rages or fits of anger | 10.0 |
| 4. Frequently get into heated arguments | 7.5 |
| 5. Have thoughts of committing a horrible act against others | 9.6 |

Appendix C. Life Events Reported by at Least 50 Percent of Young Adults, by College Career Stage

Event Number	%
<i>First-Year: Freshmen (N = 156)</i>	
3 Found a new group of friends	82.1

15 Joined a club or group	60.9	29 Started making own money	63.2
19 Met a teacher I liked a lot	50.0	46 Turned in assignment late	51.3
27 Unprepared for an exam	69.9	47 Broke up with boy/girlfriend	55.0
46 Turned in assignment late	51.3	50 Made a friend who is not of the same race	64.0
50 Made a friend who is not of the same race	61.5		
<i>Second-Year: Sophomores (N = 215)</i>		<i>Seniors (N = 132)</i>	
3 Found a new group of friends	85.1	2 Family accident or illness	53.0
15 Joined a club or group	63.7	3 Found a new group of friends	76.5
19 Met a teacher I liked a lot	62.3	6 Fell in love	73.5
27 Unprepared for an exam	85.6	15 Joined a club or group	73.5
29 Started making own money	55.8	19 Met a teacher I liked a lot	74.2
50 Made a friend who is not of the same race	77.3	23 Started dating regularly	53.0
		27 Unprepared for an exam	79.5
<i>Third-Year: Juniors (N = 190)</i>		29 Started making own money	65.9
3 Found a new group of friends	81.7	44 Made potential job contacts	58.3
6 Fell in love	65.8	46 Turned in assignment late	56.1
15 Joined a club or group	63.0	47 Broke up with boy/girlfriend	62.1
19 Met a teacher I liked a lot	57.4	50 Made a friend who is not of the same race	76.5
27 Unprepared for an exam	83.7		
		Life Events common to entire sample: 3, 15, 19, 27, 50	

Appendix Table A1. Pearson Correlations of College Career Stage,^a Area-Specific Life Events, and Psychological Distress in Sample of Young Adults

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
(1) First year	1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
(2) Second year		1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
(3) Third year			1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
(4) School				1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
(5) Family					1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
(6) Affiliative opport.						1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—
(7) Race relations							1.00	—	—	—	—	—
(8) Deviance								1.00	—	—	—	—
(9) Physical assault									1.00	—	—	—
(10) Depression										1.00	—	—
(11) Anxiety											1.00	—
(12) Anger/Hostility												1.00
Mean				1.67	1.31	.70	.16	.43	.12	20.26	2.25	.42
SD				(1.22)	(1.23)	(.85)	(.41)	(.74)	(.41)	(13.94)	(1.92)	(.94)
Range				0-6	0-6	0-4	0-2	0-4	0-3	0-78	0-7	0-5
N = 697	(137)	(214)	(189)									

^a Seniors are comparison category.† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

REFERENCES

- Agresti, Alan and Barbara Finlay. 1986. *Statistical Methods for the Social Sciences*. San Francisco: Dellen.
- Aneshensel, Carol S., Carolyn M. Rutter, and Peter A. Lachenbruch. 1991. "Depression and Physical Illness: A Multiwave, Nonrecursive Causal Model." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 25:350-71.
- Archer, James and Alisa Lamnin. 1985. "An Investigation of Personal and Academic Stressors on College Campuses." *Journal of College Student Personnel* 26:210-15.
- Aseltine, Robert H., Susan Gore, and Mary Ellen Colten. 1994. "Depression and the Social Developmental Context of Adolescence." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67:252-63.
- Aseltine, Robert H., Susan Gore, and Jennifer Gordon. 2000. "Life Stress, Anger and Anxiety, and Delinquency: An Empirical Test of General Strain Theory." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 41:256-75.
- Babbitt, Charles E., Harold J. Burbach, and Myron A. Thompson. 1975. "Organizational Alienation Among Black College Students: A Comparison of Three Educational Settings." *Journal of College Student Personnel* 16:53-56.
- Boergers, Julie, Anthony Spirito, and Deidre Donaldson. 1998. "Reasons for Adolescent Suicide Attempts: Associations With Psychological Functioning." *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 37:1287-93.
- Boyd, Jeffrey H. and Myrna M. Weissman. 1982. "Screening for Depression in a Community Sample." *Archives of General Psychiatry* 39:1195-1200.
- Cabrera, Alberto F., Amaury Nora, Patrick T. Terenzini, Ernest Pascarella, and Linda S. Hagedorn. 1999. "Campus Racial Climate and the Adjustment of Students to College: A Comparison Between White Students and African-American Students." *Journal of Higher Education* 70:134-60.
- Chickering, Arthur W. and Linda Reisser. 1993. *Education and Identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Derogatis, Leonard R. and Ronald S. Lipman. 1977. *SCL-90: Administration, Scoring, and Procedures Manual for the Revised Version*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Derogatis, Leonard R., Ronald S. Lipman, and Lino Covi. 1973. "SCL-90: An Outpatient Psychiatric Rating Scale—Preliminary Report." *Psychopharmacology Bulletin* 9:13-28.
- Erikson, Erik. 1950. "Growth and Crisis of the Healthy Personality." Pp. 91-146 in *Symposium on the Healthy Personality*, edited by Milton J.E. Senn. New York: Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation.
- . 1968. "Identity and Identity Diffusion." Pp. 197-205 in *The Self in Social Interaction*, edited by Chad Gordon and Kenneth J. Gergen. New York: Wiley.
- Everson, Susan, Debbie E. Goldberg, George A. Kaplan, Juhani Julkunen, and Jukka T. Salonen. 1998. "Anger Expression and Incident Hypertension." *Psychosomatic Medicine* 60:730-35.
- Forman, Tyrone A., David R. Williams, and James S. Jackson. 1997. "Race, Place, and Discrimination." *Perspectives on Social Problems* 9:231-61.
- Goldston, David B., Stephanie Daniel, David M. Reboussin, and Arthur Kelley. 1996. "First-Time Suicide Attempters, Repeat Attempters, and Previous Attempters on an Adolescent Inpatient Psychiatry Unit." *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 35:631-39.
- Hirsch, Barton J. 1985. "Adolescent Coping and Support Across Multiple Social Environments." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 13:381-92.
- Hirsch, Barton J. and E. Ann Jolly. 1984. "Role Transitions and Social Networks: Social Support for Multiple Roles." Pp. 39-51 in *Role Transitions*, edited by Vernon L. Allen and Evert van de Vliet. New York: Plenum.
- Horwitz, Allen V., Helene R. White, and Sandra Howell-White. 1996. "The Use of Multiple Outcomes in Stress Research: A Case Study of Gender Differences in Responses to Marital Dissolution." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 37:278-91.
- Jackson, Pamela Braboy. 1992. "Specifying the Buffering Hypothesis: Support, Strain, and Depression." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 55:363-78.
- Kandel, Denise B. and Mark Davies. 1982. "Epidemiology of Depressive Mood in Adolescents." *Archives of General Psychiatry* 39:1205-12.
- Kandel, Denise, Ora Simcha-Fagan, and Mark Davies. 1986. "Risk Factors for Delinquency and Illicit Drug Use From Adolescence to Young Adulthood." *Journal of Drug Issues* 16:67-90.
- Lyons, James E. 1973. "The Adjustment of Black Students to Predominantly White Campuses." *Journal of Negro Education* 42:462-66.
- Makepeace, James M. 1981. "Courtship Violence Among College Students." *Family Relations* 30:97-102.

- . 1983. "Life Events Stress and Courtship Violence." *Family Relations* 32:101-109.
- McAdams, Dan P. 1982. "Intimacy Motivation." Pp. 133-71 in *Motivation and Society*, edited by Abigail J. Stewart. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mechanic, David and Stephen Hansell. 1989. "Divorce, Family Conflict, and Adolescents' Well-Being." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 30:105-16.
- Mirowsky, John and Catherine E. Ross. 1992. "Age and Depression." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 33:187-205.
- Newcomb, Michael D., George J. Huba, and Peter M. Bentler. 1981. "A Multidimensional Assessment of Stressful Life Events Among Adolescents: Derivation and Correlates." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 22:400-15.
- Nolen-Hoeksema, Susan. 1987. "Sex Differences in Unipolar Depression: Evidence and Theory." *Psychological Bulletin* 101:259-82.
- . 1990. *Sex Differences in Depression*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Pancer, S. Mark, Bruce Hunsberger, Michael W. Pratt, and Susan Alisat. 2000. "Cognitive Complexity of Expectations and Adjustment to University in the First Year." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 15:38-57.
- Pascarella, Ernest T. and Patrick T. Terenzini. 1991. *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights From Twenty Years of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pearlin, Leonard I. and Morton A. Lieberman. 1979. "Social Sources of Emotional Distress." *Research in Community and Mental Health* 1:217-48.
- Radloff, Lenore S. 1975. "Sex Differences in Depression: The Effects of Occupational and Marital Status." *Sex Roles* 1:249-65.
- . 1977. "The CES-D Scale: A Self-Report Depression Scale for Research in the General Population." *Applied Psychological Measurement* 3:385-401.
- Redmore, Carolyn. 1983. "Ego Development in the College Years: Two Longitudinal Studies." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 12:301-306.
- Roberts, Robert E. 1980. "Reliability of the CES-D Scale in Different Ethnic Contexts." *Psychiatry Research* 2:125-34.
- Rosenfield, Sarah. 1980. "Sex Differences in Depression: Do Women Always Have Higher Rates?" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 21:33-42.
- Rosenthal, Susan L., Kathleen A. Burklow, Lisa M. Lewis, Paul A. Succop, and Frank M. Biro. 1997. "Heterosexual Romantic Relationships and Sexual Behaviors of Young Adolescent Girls." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 21:238-43.
- Ross, Catherine, John Mirowsky, and Joan Huber. 1983. "Dividing Work, Sharing Work, and In-Between: Marriage Patterns and Depression." *American Sociological Review* 48:809-23.
- Sandin, Bonifacio, Paloma Chorot, Miguel A. Santed, Rosa M. Valiente, and Thomas E. Joiner Jr. 1998. "Negative Life Events and Adolescent Suicidal Behavior: A Critical Analysis From the Stress Process Perspective." *Journal of Adolescence* 21:415-26.
- Sarason, Irwin G., James H. Johnson, and Judith M. Siegel. 1978. "Assessing the Impact of Life Changes: Development of the Life Experiences Survey." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 46:932-46.
- Schuman, David and Dick Olufs. 1995. *Diversity on Campus*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Shaver, Phillip and Mary Klinnert. 1982. "Schachter's Theories of Affiliation and Emotion: Implications of Developmental Research." Pp. 37-72 in *Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 3, edited by Ladd Wheeler. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Thoits, Peggy A. 1983. "Dimensions of Life Events That Influence Psychological Distress." Pp. 33-103 in *Psychosocial Stress: Trends in Theory and Research*, edited by Howard B. Kaplan. New York: Academic Press.
- . 1984. "Coping, Social Support, and Psychological Outcomes: The Central Role of Emotion." Pp. 219-38 in *Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 5, edited by Phillip Shaver. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- . 1989. "The Sociology of Emotions." *Annual Review of Sociology* 15:317-42.
- Thomas, William I. 1966. "The Relation of Research to the Social Process." Pp. 289-305 in *W.I. Thomas on Social Organization and Social Personality*, edited by Morris Janowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vredenburg, Karel, Erin O'Brien, and Lester Krames. 1988. "Depression in College Students: Personality and Experiential Factors." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 35:419-25.
- Weathersby, Rita P. 1981. "Ego Development." Pp. 51-75 in *The Modern American College: Responding to the New Realities of Diverse Students and a Changing Society*, edited by Arthur W. Chickering and associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Weissman, Myrna M. and Gerald L. Klerman. 1977. "Sex Differences and the Epidemiology of Depression." *Archives of General Psychiatry* 34:98-111.

- Weissman, Myrna M., Philip J. Leaf, Charles E. Holzer, Jerome K. Myers, and Gary L. Tischler. 1984. "The Epidemiology of Depression: An Update on Sex Differences in Rates." *Journal of Affective Disorders* 7:179-88.
- Wickrama, K.A.S., Rand D. Conger, Lora E. Wallace, and Glen H. Elder Jr. 1999. "The Intergenerational Transmission of Health-Risk Behaviors: Adolescent Lifestyles and Gender Moderating Effects." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 40:258-72.
- Williams, David R., Yan Yu, and James S. Jackson. 1997. "Racial Differences in Physical and Mental Health: Socio-Economic Status, Stress and Discrimination." *Journal of Health Psychology* 2:335-51.

Pamela Braboy Jackson is associate professor of sociology at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her primary research interests include the psychological impact of role sequencing and race and gender tokenism in the workplace. In addition to research on mental health, she has published in the areas of socialization, identity, and self-concept development. Recent publications include "I Am Woman: The Impact of Social Identities on African American Women's Mental Health" (with S. Mustillo) *Women & Health*, 2001; and "Self-Esteem and Race" (with S. Lassiter) in Owens, T., S. Stryker, and N. Goodman, eds., *Extending Self-Esteem Theory and Research*, 2001.

Montenique L. Finney is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Ohio State University. Much of her research focuses on the psycho physiological effects of stress. She also studies the interactions among ethnicity, social support, self-disclosure, anger/hostility, and reactions to stressful events. Recent publications include "Social support and Stress: Influences on Lipid Reactivity" (with C.M. Stoney) *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 2000.