

Promoting resilience through social identity in adolescents



RESEARCH

‘Promoting resilience in adolescents: A new social identity benefits those who need it most’

by Elizabeth Koni, Saleh Moradi, Hitaua Arahanga-Doyle, Dr. Tia Neha, Jillian G. Hayhurst, Mike Boyes, Tegan Cruwys, John A. Hunter, Damian Scarf (2019)

Published in *PLoS ONE*, 14(1) (2019)

Background

Social groups play an important role in helping us discover who we are. They provide us with meaning and belonging which help to construct our social identity. Group memberships also have important consequences for a person’s health and wellbeing – they can improve resilience, cure depression, and reduce depression relapse.

However, previous research has focused primarily on the social identities that people already have, and some research suggests that providing adolescents with a new social identity can directly improve their health and wellbeing.

The Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, was part of a study looking at whether introducing a new social identity would improve resilience in adolescents.

Main research findings

In Study 1, one hundred and thirty six adolescents from Auckland took part in a 10-day voyage on the Spirit of New Zealand (a large sailing vessel). Each person was assigned to a group of ten people (five women, five men). These groups were termed Watch Groups, in which participants completed a range of goal-orientated activities over the voyage. The Watch Groups provided the participants with a new social identity group, which improved the resilience of those who were lowest in resilience prior to the voyage. Adolescents with a stronger sense of belonging to their Watch Group tended to have greater increases in resilience. However, the Watch Groups had no effect for those who were higher in resilience prior to the voyage.

In Study 2, ninety one adolescents from Northland — the majority of who identified as Māori — participated in a 7-day voyage on the R Tucker Thompson (also a large sailing vessel). To incorporate Māori concepts into the voyage, a *mihi* (welcome) was performed prior to boarding the vessel and crewmembers partook in games and activities as a way to promote *whanaungatanga* (belonging). The findings replicated those of Study 1 — resilience increased most in those who were lowest in resilience prior to the voyage and adolescents who had a stronger sense of belonging to their voyage group tended to have greater increases in resilience (this tendency was even greater for the Māori adolescents). Contrary to Study 1, resilience also increased in those higher in resilience before the voyage, which may represent a cultural difference between the study samples.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

The findings support the Social Identity Approach to health — that social identities are important determinants of health and wellbeing. Providing a new social identity in adolescents, particularly for those low in resilience, can improve resilience in both Māori and Pākehā populations.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the benefits of incorporating *Te Ao Māori* (a Māori worldview) into research with Māori. The use of *whanaungatanga* (belonging) in Study 2 allowed the new social identity development to occur in a culturally responsive setting for Māori, enhancing the benefits of the voyage.

Future research should look into the interplay between personal and social identity during the development of a new social identity, and the long-term effects these have on health and wellbeing. This research contributes to the large body of literature on youth wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand and exemplifies how a Social Identity Approach to health can be applied by NGOs and policy-makers.