

Research I have been working on recently with students .....

I have a couple lines of research that I am presently engaged in with students. The first involves identity development in young or emerging adults. Emerging adulthood is a stage of life when many young people perceive themselves as “in-between” adulthood and adolescence. Jeffrey Arnett has coined the term “emerging adulthood” for individuals in westernized cultures between the ages of 18 and 25 who have yet to achieve independence in relationships, finances and personal decision-making. Many college students would resonate with his research about this age group. I have examined the political attitudes and behaviors of emerging adults to determine what motivates their willingness (or lack of) to gain political information and vote in elections. In my lab, we have investigated every federal election since 2004, even participating in a nationwide data gathering exercise with 13 other colleges. Although I am fascinated by the reasons behind emerging adult political behavior, I also recognize the applied value of this research in encouraging young adults to vote and increasing their civic engagement. Tied into my interest in civic engagement is ongoing research on how participating in community-based learning in the classroom impacts the learning experience.

In a second line of research I investigate the efficacy of mindfulness meditation in comparison to other self-regulatory techniques in controlling negative emotions, such as depression and anger. I have a longstanding interest in the social cognitive side of depression and self-relevant information processing when one experiences negative emotions. Surprisingly, sometimes the impact of mild depression is an increased ability to engage in problem solving, perhaps because an individual can focus rather than be distracted by peripheral environmental input. With regards to mindfulness meditation, it has been suggested that it allows a focusing of attention that draws the mind away from rumination on negative affect, thus allowing the individual to ‘let go’ of emotion and move forward. In our lab, we have found just such an effect with anger and hope to continue exploring the mechanisms that drive the effect. As part of my interest in health and processing of self-relevant information, I have also explored how people respond to health threats. Not everyone likes to gain knowledge regarding serious health-related issues and I am particularly interested in the thinking process for those who prefer to avoid exploring self-relevant information.

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