

The Role of Lifetime Stress in the Relation between Socioeconomic Status and Health-Risk Behaviors

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Abstract : Health-risk behaviors (e.g., smoking, poor diet) directly increase the risk for chronic disease and morbidity. There is substantial evidence of a negative association between socioeconomic status (SES) and engagement in health-risk behaviors. However, due to the complexity of SES, researchers have suggested looking beyond this factor to fully understand the mechanisms that underlie engagement in health-risk behaviors. Stress is one plausible mechanism through which SES impacts health-risk behaviors. Currently, it remains unclear how stress occurring across the life course might impact health behaviors and explain the association between SES and these behaviors. To address the gaps in the literature, 172 adults between the ages of 18-49 were surveyed about their lifetime stress exposure, sociodemographic variables, and health-risk behaviors via an online recruitment portal, Prolific. Five major findings emerged from the current study. First, SES was negatively associated with engagement in health-risk behaviors and lifetime stress above and beyond current stress and other relevant demographics. Second, lifetime stress was significantly associated with health-risk behaviors above and beyond current stress and relevant demographic variables. Third, lifetime stress fully mediated the association between SES and health-risk behaviors above and beyond current stress and other demographics. Fourth, the severity of stress experienced emerged as the most significant lifetime stress variable that explains the relation between SES and health-risk behaviors. Fifth and finally, lower SES and experiencing financial and legal/crime stressors increased the likelihood of engaging in health-risk behaviors. The current study results align with previous research and suggest that stress occurring over the lifespan impacts the relation between SES and health-risk behaviors, which are in turn known to impact health outcomes. However, our findings move the current literature forward by providing a more nuanced understanding of the specific aspects of stress that influence this association. Specifically, the severity of stress experienced across the entire lifespan was the most important aspect of stress when examining the association between SES and health-risk behaviors. Further, individuals most at risk for engaging in health-risk behaviors are those of the lowest SES and experience financial and legal/crime stressors. These findings have the potential to inform interventions and policies aimed at addressing health-risk behaviors by providing a more sophisticated understanding of the impact of stress.

Keywords : stress, health behaviors, socioeconomic status, health

Conference Title : ICCP 2021 : International Conference on Community Psychology

Conference Location : Amsterdam, Netherlands

Conference Dates : May 13-14, 2021