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Date: October 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2013
Time: 12:00-2:00pm
Location: 1 North Henderson Bldg.

Areas of Specialization: Adolescent Development and Prevention

ADOLESCENT AGENCY:

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL, MEASUREMENT, AND CONSTRUCT VALIDITY

Agency is the ability to make decisions and take actions that shape the course and direction of one’s life. Adolescence represents an opportune time for youth to develop a sense of agency as social roles and expectations begin to change. Research that empirically tests models of adolescent agency, however, are just beginning to emerge in the literature. The research on agency is also hampered at times by lack of conceptual clarity about the construct and corresponding measurement challenges.
This study sought to address these issues in two ways. Conceptually, it proposes a multidimensional model of adolescent agency that is informed by three developmental meta-theories: Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985), social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989), and Selection-Optimization-Compensation (Baltes, 1997) and comprises dimensions of motivation, cognition, and behavior. Second, using data from 390 adolescents, in 6th and 7th grades, it tests the factor structure, convergent, divergent, and incremental validity of a 9-item instrument constructed to reflect the conceptual model. Results demonstrate a one-factor solution as the most parsimonious solution that is consistent for both genders. In SEM models, the agency measure demonstrated strong convergent validity with positive youth development constructs of self-esteem, future perspective, assertiveness, and problem-solving, behavioral adaptation, and family processes. The measure also demonstrated divergent validity through weak non-significant associations with indicators of household resources (i.e., SES and financial strain). Finally, in hierarchical regression models the measure demonstrated added value by significantly accounting for additional variance in models predicting positive youth characteristics and youth risk behaviors.

This dissertation contributes to the study of agency in two important ways. Conceptually, it added clarity to the literature on agency by grounding the construct in three developmental meta-theories. Empirically, it illustrated a short, parsimonious measure of agency was meaningfully associated with other psychosocial and familial constructs in expected ways. Further, findings from this study provide insight into the unique role that agency may play in risk behavior. Together, the conceptual and empirical work of this dissertation can serve to expand the field of agency research, and provides preliminary implications for prevention work with youth.