Empowering marginalized youth

A self-transformative intervention for promoting positive youth development

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Context: Alternative high schools of Miami Dade County Public Schools

- Students referred to alternative high schools because of
  - Absenteeism
  - Academic failure
  - Chronic disruptive behavior
  - Identification as a potential dropout

- Marginalization: disempowering urban contexts
  - Poverty
  - Lack of resources
  - Exposure to violence
    - Victim of: mugging (37.5%), stabbing (19.8%), shooting (10.5%)
    - Witness of mugging (86.5%), stabbing (63.5%), shooting (60.4%), dead bodies (66.6%), suicide (19.8%), murder (41.6%)

Dade County Public Schools, 1986

Berman, Kurtines, Silverman, & Serafini, 1996
Empowerment at the community level:

- **Sustained outreach** to help school district meet need for counseling services in its alternative high schools by leveraging locally available resources (Kurtines et al., 2008)

Empowerment at the individual level:

- Group-based **participatory co-learning**

- Help young people learn to change their own lives by **promoting positive identity development**
Developmental interventions

Promote positive development
Structured interventions
Developmental systems
Developmental processes during life transitions

Changing Lives Program
Adolescence: Identity development and the life course

1. Constructed by the individual through choices and actions

2. Established pathways with socially sanctioned timetables for life transitions

3. Increased likelihood of a life course turning point

Elder & Shanahan, 2006; Kurtines et al., 2008
Identity development through self-discovery

- Youth **discover** who they are
  - through activities that actualize their unique personal potentials
  - *Feelings of personal expressiveness* = a feeling that this activity is what I am meant to do

Schwartz, Kurtines, & Montgomery, 2005; Waterman, 2011
Identity development through **self-construction**

- Youth *construct* who they are
  - through the solutions they create for their life challenges
- Builds critical thinking and discussion competencies
- Creates mastery experiences that promote a *sense of control and responsibility*

Berzonsky, 2011; Kurtines et al., 1995
# CHANGING LIVES PROGRAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention Phase</th>
<th>Intervention Content</th>
<th>Developmental Process</th>
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<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Life course narrative</td>
<td>Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participatory Co-Learning</td>
<td>Most important life goal</td>
<td>Self-Discovery (uncovering personal strengths and potentials)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Life change goal</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Critical problem solving</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Transformative Activities</td>
<td>Self-selected actions</td>
<td>Self-Construction (creating own solutions to life’s problems)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Sense of Identity**
(direction and purpose)
Self-transformative model for promoting positive development

- Contextual Opportunities and Constraints (e.g., PYD programs)
  - Intervention = creating opportunities for action

- Self-Discovery (Emotion-focused) Processes
  - Uncovering personal strengths and potentials

- Self-Construction (Cognitive) Processes
  - Creating own solutions to life challenges

- Sense of Identity (Direction and purpose)
  - Qualitative structural-organizational change

A +/- B +/- C + D + E +/-
Study aim: Test the self-transformative model

- Test predictions made by the **self-transformative model**

  1. Providing opportunities for self-discovery and self-construction promotes positive qualitative change in identity

  2. Positive qualitative change in identity promotes positive change across multiple outcome domains (positive and problem)
The present study

- 209 African American and Hispanic adolescents (ages 14-18) attending alternative high schools in Miami-Dade County Public Schools
  - 113 adolescents: participated in the Changing Lives Program based on school counselor/teacher/student request
  - 96 adolescents: non-intervention, non-random comparison condition
- Changing Lives Program groups were organized and implemented through schools’ on-campus counseling program.
  - met for approximately 45 minutes every week for 8 to 12 weeks (Fall or Spring semester)
  - group members: 4-6 adolescents
  - intervention team: facilitator and co-facilitator (graduate psychology students), group assistant (undergraduate psychology students)
- Assessment:
  - Pretest (T1) = week before start of group sessions
  - Posttest (T2) = week after end of group sessions
  - Follow-up (T3) = four months after T2 assessment
Measures

- **Self-discovery:** Personally Expressive Activities Questionnaire (Waterman, 1993)
  - Feelings of personal expressiveness subscale: 6 items on 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*)
  - Adapted for activities essential to life goal pursuit (α = .91; sample item: “When I do these activities, I feel like it’s what I was meant to do”)

- **Self-construction:** Personal Responsibility Measure (Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2002)
  - Life challenges subscale: 4 items on 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*None*) to 5 (*Total*)
  - Sense of control over and responsibility for actions and consequences associated with life challenges (α = .69; sample item: “How much control do you have over your decisions and actions?”)

- **Life goal:** Personally Expressive Activities Questionnaire-Qualitative Extension (Rinaldi et al., 2012)
  - Life goal narratives coded for integration of interests, talents, potentials with elements of life goal
    - 1 = Self-integrated (personally expressive): “*Being a Nurse means a lot to me because I always have liked helping others. I have always known I would be good at taking care of others.*”
    - 0 = Non-integrated (non-personally expressive): “*Travel a lot. Explore the world. Having freedom. Free my mind and be like an eagle.*”
  - Intercoder agreement (5 coders) = 96%, Fleiss’s Kappa = .84 (Rinaldi et al., 2012).
Measures

- **Identity synthesis**: Erikson Psycho-Social Stage Index (Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981)
  - Identity resolution subscale: 12 items on 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*almost never true*) to 5 (*almost always true*)
  - Resolution of identity conflicts, lack of identity confusion ($\alpha = .77$; sample item: “I know what kind of person I am”)

- Problem behaviors: Behavior Problem Index (Peterson & Zill, 1986)
  - 32 items on 3-point scale ranging from 1 (*often true*) to 3 (*not true*)
  - Self-reports of inwardly-focused problem behaviors (internalizing) and outwardly-focused problem behaviors (externalizing)
  - **Internalizing problems** subscale ($\alpha = .81$; sample item: “I cried too much”)
  - **Externalizing problems** subscale ($\alpha = .85$; sample item: “I was impulsive, or acted without thinking”)

Model 1

Covariate-adjusted change:
- Pretests (T1) were covariates of predictors (Self-Discovery, Self-Construction) and outcomes (Life Goal) at T2
- Age, gender were covariates, assessed as moderators

Structural equation modeling: tested competing models
**Model 1**

**Full model:**

$\chi^2(47) = 51.26, p = .31, \text{CFI} = .96, \text{RMSEA} = .02$
Model 2

Direct effects-only model:
\[ \chi^2(57) = 67.75, \ p = .16, \ CFI = .89, \ RMSEA = .03; \]
versus Model 1: \[ \chi^2_{\text{diff}}(10) = 19.31, \ p = .037 \]
Model 3

No “cascade” effects model:
\[ \chi^2(53) = 63.10, \ p = .16, \ CFI = .90, \ RMSEA = .03; \]
versus Model 1: \[ \chi^2_{\text{diff}}(6) = 16.76, \ p = .01 \]
Model 1

Included product terms for interaction effects: None significant → trimmed from model
Model 1

Estimated effects from Model 1
### Path Estimates for Specified Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Path Coefficient</th>
<th>95% C.I.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Discovery at T2</td>
<td>CLP (Path A)</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>[.05, 0.63]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Construction at T2</td>
<td>CLP (Path B)</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>[.11, 0.40]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Goal at T2</td>
<td>Self-Discovery at T2 (Path C)</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>[.09, 0.39]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Construction at T2 (Path D)</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>[-0.40, 0.24]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CLP (Path E)</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>[-2.45, 2.40]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Synthesis at T3</td>
<td>Life Goal at T2 (Path F)</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>[.07, 0.28]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CLP (Path G)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>[-0.40, 0.53]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing Problems at T3</td>
<td>Life Goal at T2 (Path H)</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>[-0.25,-0.01]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CLP (Path I)</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>[-0.26, 0.43]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Externalizing Problems at T3</td>
<td>Life Goal at T2 (Path J)</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>[-0.18, 0.08]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CLP (Path K)</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>[-0.12, 0.21]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Standardized coefficients are in parentheses. *p < .05, **p < .01
Limitations

- Lack of:
  - randomization (real-world trade-off in an outreach context)
  - time lag between targeted processes and outcome
  - multiple indicators of constructs
  - reciprocal cascade effects
- Left out variable error (LOVE) problem?:
  - adolescent-counselor, adolescent-group relationships
Basic conclusions

• Self-transformative model is mostly supported

• Identity-focused empowerment may help marginalized youth
  • develop a vision for the future
  • (and reduce problem behavior)

• Intervention cascade effects (positive → problem) need further examination
Broader conclusions

- Are we asking too little of adolescents when they exhibit “problem” behaviors?
  - Appears possible to provide opportunities for these youth to
    - discover their own personal potentials and
    - create their own solutions to life challenges
  - *Life challenges = opportunities for growth?*
Thank you.
References


References


References


Waterman, A. S. (1993). Two conceptions of happiness: Contrasts of personal expressiveness (eudaimonia) and hedonic enjoyment. Journal of personality and social psychology, 64, 678. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.64.4.678