

# Engaging marginalized youth in positive identity development

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## The Changing Lives Program

Kyle Eichas, Tarleton State University

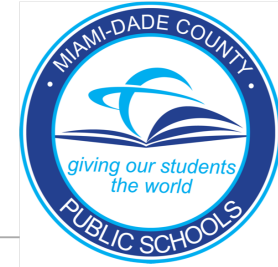
[eichas@tarleton.edu](mailto:eichas@tarleton.edu)

Marilyn Montgomery, Capella University

Alan Meca, Old Dominion University

Arlene Garcia, Florida International University

# Context: Alternative high schools, Miami, Florida, USA



- Functioned as a “last stop” for students at risk for school dropout
- Students referred to alternative high schools because of
  - Absenteeism
  - Academic failure
  - Chronic disruptive behavior
  - Identification as a potential dropout

Dade County Public Schools, 1986

- 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%)

Berman, Kurtines, Silverman, & Serafini, 1996



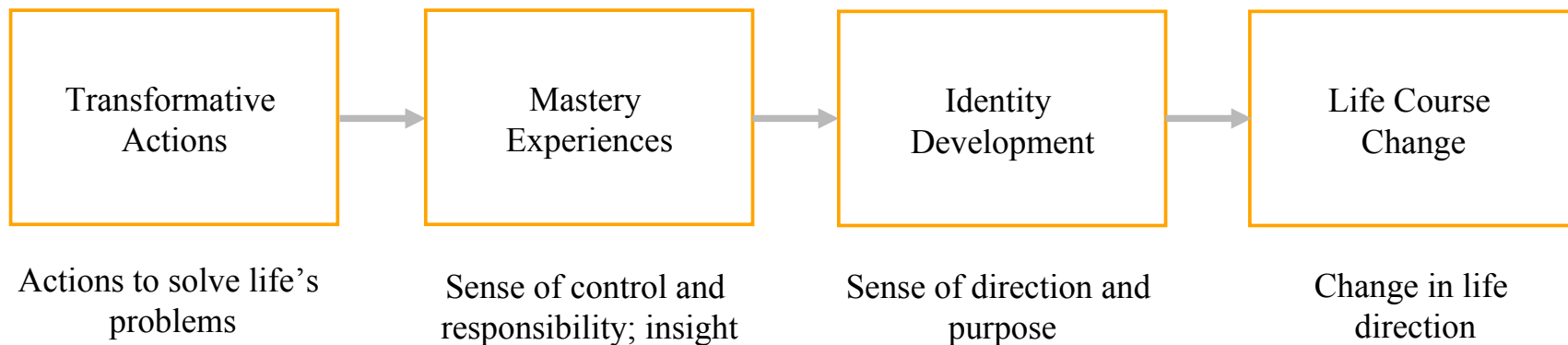
# CHANGING LIVES PROGRAM

Miami, Florida, 1995-2011



- Goal: positive qualitative change in the life course, from negative direction to positive
  - Life challenges = opportunities for mastery experiences
  - Intervention strategy = *facilitate mastery experiences*

## Theory of How Lives Change



# 1. Engagement

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- Building connections between people in ways that create group cohesion.
  - Empathy, praise, attention in a close relationship → connectedness (Karcher, Holcomb, & Zambrano, 2008)
    - Vertical relationships (adolescent  $\leftrightarrow$  facilitator)
    - Horizontal relationships (adolescent  $\leftrightarrow$  group)

## 2. Participatory Co-Learning

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- **Participatory co-learning** = collaboration between experts:
  - Problem posing = collaborate to identify the right problem to solve (co-construct the problem)
  - Critical problem solving = collaborate to identify the right solution (co-construct the solution)
- Based on Freire (1983): Replace teacher-student dichotomy with a problem-posing dialogue

### 3. Transformative Actions

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- **Implementing the solution (i.e., doing something)**
  - Creates mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997)
- **Life course mastery experiences**
  - transform the way youth understand and feel about their capacity to determine who they are and where they are going in life (Kurtines et al., 2008)

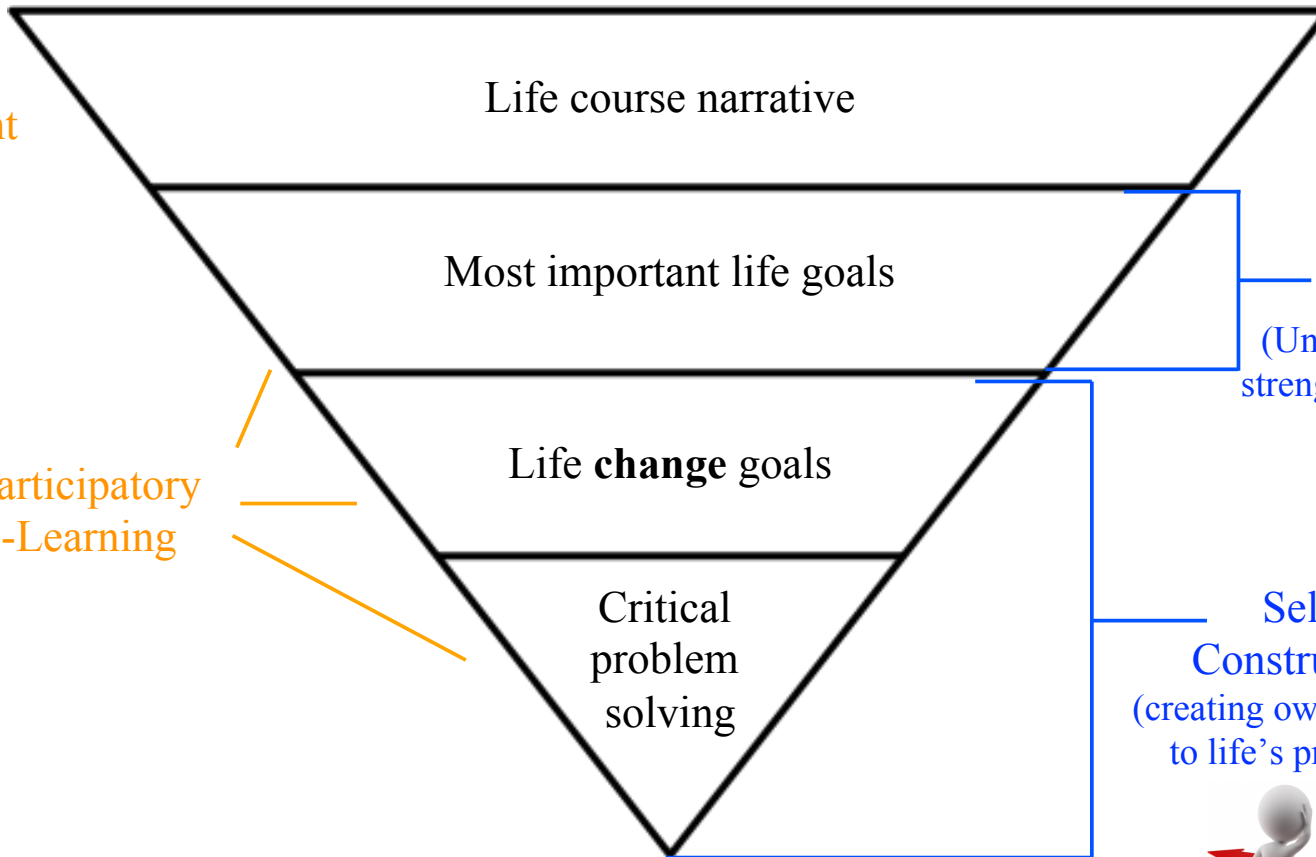
# CHANGING LIVES PROGRAM

Structured content

*Intervention  
Processes:*

*Identity  
Processes:*

1. Engagement



Self-  
Discovery  
(Uncovering personal  
strengths and potentials)

2. Participatory  
Co-Learning

Self-  
Construction  
(creating own solutions  
to life's problems)

3. Transformative Actions

# Previous findings: Self-constructive identity processes

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- Two quasi-experimental trials:
  - Ferrer-Wreder et al. (2001; N = 92): Intervention-related increase in self-construction processes
    - Sense of control over and responsibility for life change goal
  - Eichas et al. (2017; N = 209): Intervention-related increase in self-construction
    - Sense of control over and responsibility for life change goal
    - Other findings:
      - lesser decrease in self-discovery
      - life goal development → reduction in internalizing problems



# Main research questions

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- Are intervention processes (engagement and participatory co-learning) associated with
  - increased self-constructive identity processes?
  - increased mental health?

# The present study

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- 236 adolescents (143 females, 93 males) aged 14-19 attending alternative high schools in Miami-Dade County Public Schools between 2003 and 2008
  - Participated in the Changing Lives Program based on school counselor/teacher/student request, attended at least four sessions
- 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
  - Session-by-session evaluation of intervention process
  - Posttest (T2) = week after end of group sessions

# Measures

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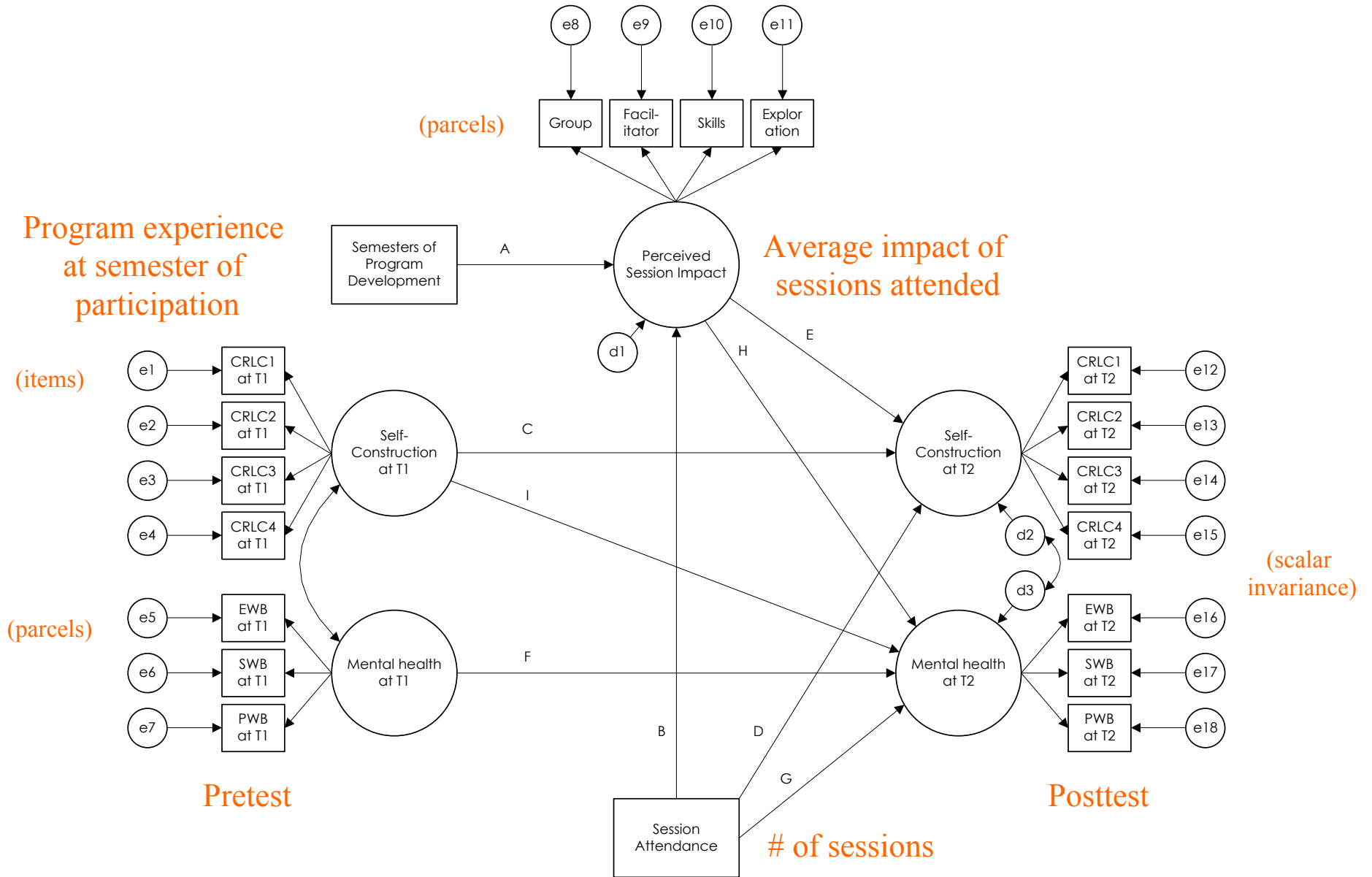
- **Session Impact:** Youth Development Project – Session Evaluation Form (YDP-SEF; Bussell & Kurtines, 1999) collected immediately after each session
  - 10 items on 5-point scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Very much*), adapted from Elliott and Wexler's (1994) Session Impacts Scale
  - Bifactor model: Specific engagement and participatory co-learning factors
    - Group Impact (GI), 3 items,  $\omega = .70$ 
      - (e.g., “I felt that the group supported and encouraged me”)
    - Facilitator Impact (FI), 2 items,  $\omega = .85$ 
      - (e.g., “I felt that the facilitator supported and encouraged me”)
    - Skills Impact (SI), 2 items,  $\omega = .81$ 
      - (e.g., “I learned things that will help me with my problems”)
    - Exploration Impact (EI), 2 items,  $\omega = .72$ 
      - (e.g., “I felt I had a chance to talk about new and different points of view”)
  - General Session Impact, 10 items,  $\omega = .97$

# Measures

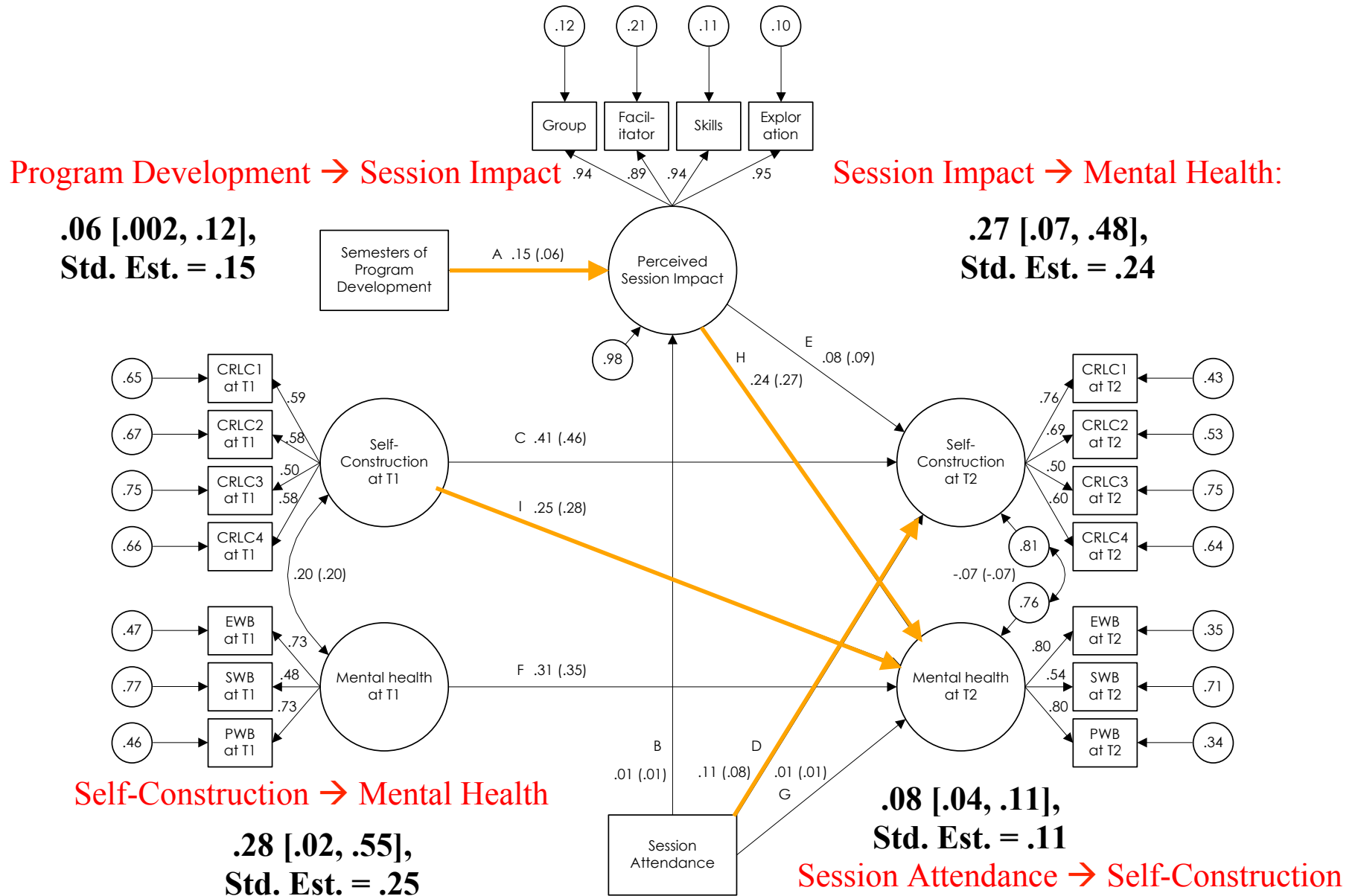
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- **Self-Construction: Personal Responsibility Measure (Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2002)**
  - Life challenges subscale: 4 items on 5-point scale from 1 (None) to 5 (Total)
  - Sense of control over and responsibility for actions and consequences associated with life challenges (sample item: “How much control do you have over your decisions and actions?”)
- **Mental Health: Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (Keyes, 2005)**
  - 13 items on a 5-point scale from 1 (almost never true) to 5 (almost always true)
  - Emotional wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, and social wellbeing as indicators of mental health

# Outcome Process Model



# Outcome Process Model



# Limitations

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- (1) Data limitations:
  - Archival data
  - Self-report only
  - Inconsistent attendance from week to week
- (2) Did not assess effect of change in session impact (session-to-session or trajectory)
- (3) Left out variable error (LOVE) problems?:
  - Student's transformative actions
  - Facilitator's experience, facilitator's skill
  - Home/school environment

# Conclusions

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- General effect on mental health
- No evidence of a specific effect on self-constructive identity processes—effects on self-construction must work through other processes
- For the program, session impact improved over time
- **Self-constructive identity processes are longitudinally linked to mental health**
- Broader conclusion:
  - need to link intervention outcome to intervention process to understand how youth development programs work



Thank you.

# References

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