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Assessing the Need for the Development of Standardized Life Skills Measures

Mat D. Duerden

Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist
Texas AgriLife Extension Services
duerden@tamu.edu

Peter A. Witt

Professor and Bradberry Recreation and Youth Development Chair
pwitt@tamu.edu

Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas

Abstract: Youth practitioners often select life skills as intentionally targeted program outcomes. While research findings suggest the efficacy of program experiences to positively influence a variety of life skills, it remains difficult to compare these findings due to measurement incongruities. Individual life skills (e.g., leadership, decision making, etc.) often lack standardized conceptualizations and measurement approaches. The purpose of the study reported here was to gather data about practitioners' perceptions of those life skill domains most in need of measurement development. Based on the results of the study, 10 life skill sub-domains are recommended for future measurement development efforts.

Introduction

The development of life skills is a commonly targeted but often poorly conceptualized outcome of youth programs. While multiple conceptualizations of life skills exist, most definitions contain elements of the World Health Organization's (1997) description, which identifies life skills as "abilities for adaptive and positive behavior, that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (1997, p. 1). A number of life skill studies have been conducted in youth-related Extension settings (Boleman, Cummings, & Briers, 2005; Boleman, Cummings, & Briers, 2004; Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992; Garton, Miltenberger, & Pruett, 2007). Although this body of literature supports a potential connection between Extension youth programs and the development of life skills, the life skills and its related sub-domains (e.g., leadership, communication, etc.) remain loosely defined. Accordingly, the diversity of conceptualizations and measurement approaches to individual life skill domains makes it difficult to confidently compare findings across studies.

Work is needed to refine and standardize the conceptualization and measurement of life skills. Due to the large array of domains that could be included under the category of life skills, work is needed to further prioritize life skill domains. Therefore, the purpose of the project reported here was to lay the foundation for future life skill measurement development by identifying life skill domains perceived by practitioners as

being most in need of instrumentation standardization.

Methods

In order to measure the perceived importance of specific life skills, an online survey (developed with *Qualtrics*) was sent to Program Directors ($N = 47$) of Children, Youth, and Families At-Risk (CYFAR) funded programs across the country. This sample was selected due to the fact that the study was part of a larger CYFAR-funded life skill standardization project. The survey asked respondents to identify the state in which their program operated, their program's targeted outcomes, and the instruments being used to measure these outcomes. Respondents were given the 35 life skills from the Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1998) and asked to select and rank the 10 life skills for which they would like to see more valid and reliable instruments developed or made available. Hendricks' model was chosen because it represented a significant effort to identify and include a wide variety of life skill domains.

Findings

Thirty-seven ($n = 37$; 78.7%) individuals representing programs located in 31 states and three territories responded to the survey. Three states had two respondents, one from each of two CYFAR-funded projects in that state. For each life skill, data were collected regarding the number of times a life skill was selected and the subsequent mean ranking of that life skill. Higher mean rank scores represent higher levels of ascribed importance.

The weighted rank scores represent the product of the number of times the item was selected as part of the respondents top ten life skills multiplied by the mean rank score (e.g., $19 * 8.37 = 159.0$). The use of the weighted rank facilitated the development of a prioritized list based both on mean rank and number of times ranked because respondents could only select 10 life scales to rank order. For example, stress management, which was selected five times, had a slightly higher mean rank than decision making, which was selected 17 times. In comparing the weighted ranks of these measures, 95 for decision making and 30 for stress management, the greater perceived importance of decision making across the respondents was revealed. Table 1 provides the listed life skill areas sorted by their weighted ranks.

Table 1.
Summary Statistics for CYFAR Directors Survey

Life Skill	Times Selected	Mean Rank*	Weighted Rank**
Leadership	19	8.37	159.00
Communication	18	6.17	111.00
Self-Esteem	15	7.13	107.00
Responsible Citizenship	14	7.43	104.00
Teamwork	14	6.93	97.00
Decision Making	17	5.59	95.00
Community Volunteering	11	8.00	88.00
Healthy Lifestyle Choices	14	6.00	84.00

Self-Responsibility	15	5.60	84.00
Problem Solving	13	5.77	75.00
Critical Thinking	12	5.92	71.00
Resiliency	12	4.67	56.00
Self-Discipline	9	6.11	55.00
Goal Setting	10	5.50	55.00
Conflict Resolution	11	4.73	52.00
Accepting Differences	10	4.80	48.00
Self-Motivation	6	6.83	41.00
Marketable Skills	7	5.43	38.00
Character	5	6.80	34.00
Stress Management	5	6.00	30.00
Learning to Learn	5	6.00	30.00
Nurturing Relationships	6	5.00	30.00
Service Learning	5	5.50	27.50
Cooperation	7	3.57	25.00
Social Skills	5	4.80	24.00
Contributions to Group Effort	3	7.00	21.00
Managing Feelings	4	4.75	19.00
Planning/Organizing	4	4.75	19.00
Empathy	3	5.67	17.00
Concern for Others	3	5.33	16.00
Sharing	3	3.33	10.00
Disease Prevention	2	4.00	8.00
Personal Safety	2	4.00	8.00
Wise Use of Resources	1	7.00	7.00
Keeping Records	1	1.00	1.00
*Higher Scores Indicate Higher Rankings ** Times Selected x Mean Rank			

Results suggest a clear group of selected and highest ranked life skill sub-domains. These items all have weighted mean ranks greater than 70, and there was a 15-point gap between the lowest item in this group and the next highest ranked item.

Conclusions

The findings are both timely and applicable because there is a current effort to standardize the measurement of life skills across all CYFAR-funded projects. Additionally, the data come directly from CYFAR Program Directors, who will be among the actual end users of measures for the identified life skill domains. Using these findings as a guide, a research team led by the authors is working to identify, validate, and refine measures for the 10 of the top 11 life skill areas. Although initially ranked number eight, healthy living was not included in the final top 10 list because it was deemed too broad a category for identifying a single measure

When interpreting the results, it is important to note that respondents were selecting life skills for which they would like to see measures developed. This does not necessarily mean they perceived selected life skill domains as most important but rather most in need of further measurement refinement. These results do not preclude the life skills identified in the study reported here as being part of a "the most important life skills" group, but future research is needed before drawing this conclusion. This explanation might explain why some potentially important life skills like empathy and nurturing relationships did not make the top 10.

The need for standardized measures of positive youth development programs has been noted for more than a decade (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002). Although significant advancements have been made in this area, life skills represent an oft targeted developmental domain still lacking in instrumentation standardization. Hopefully, the currently in process work based upon the findings from the reported study will help address this shortcoming.

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