Future Directions for Research on Core Competencies

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Abstract

This concluding commentary highlights common themes that emerged across the chapters in this volume. We identify strengths and limitations of the core competencies framework and discuss the importance of context, culture, and development for understanding the role of the core competencies in preventing risk behavior in adolescence. We also outline possible areas for future research linking positive youth development and risk prevention programming. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
Throughout this volume, a primary aim has been to highlight connections between youth development approaches that emphasize strengths for all youth and risk-prevention approaches that identify deficits related to specific problem behaviors. As we noted at the outset, these approaches often have been cast as opposite ends of a continuum. Advocates of positive youth development endorse asset-building strategies to promote healthy adjustment, noting that youth who are “problem free” are not necessarily thriving or prepared to make the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003). Supporters of risk prevention emphasize the damaging consequences of problem behaviors for adolescents and the communities they grow up in. Because empirical studies have identified specific factors that increase the likelihood of each type of problem behavior, preventive efforts that target these risk factors should be more effective and ultimately less costly to society. Indeed, as Naudeau, Cunningham, Lundberg, and McGinnis discussed in Chapter Six, policies and programs must be sensitive to the realities of limited financial resources in the United States and internationally.

An important next step is to integrate the risk-prevention literature around common themes (translate risk, protective, and promotive factors) and to build bridges between youth development and risk-prevention approaches in order to specify more clearly common predictors of multiple problem behaviors and how these are linked to healthy adjustment. Our primary focus in this volume has been to identify common predictors of four distinct problem behaviors: early school leaving, youth violence, adolescent substance use, and high-risk sexual behavior. This proved to be a reasonably difficult task, in part because each type of problem behavior tends to generate its own nomenclature for describing predictors, and there are often inconsistencies in how researchers label common constructs. For example, in examining how youth make decisions and think about consequences, substance use researchers emphasize “decision-making skills,” whereas violence researchers examine “social problem solving” or “social information processing skills.” To some extent, variations in terminology are the result of slightly different theoretical frameworks that have driven research within each area of problem behavior. As an illustration, the different language but common processes suggested by the theory of planned behavior that Charles and Blum discussed in Chapter Five and the social-cognitive information processing theories that Sullivan, Farrell, Bettencourt, and Helms discussed in Chapter Three: both address the centrality of normative beliefs about a behavior and self-efficacy to perform the behavior, but each has generated a somewhat separate strand of research.

The core competency framework was suggested as a mechanism to establish theoretical and empirical linkages across different research traditions within the risk-prevention and positive youth development literatures. Rather than select a specific theory or provide a laundry list of all risk factors, protective and promotive factors, or strengths, we tried to identify a limited number of broad competencies that were most central to the etiology and prevention of multiple problem behaviors and the promotion of adolescent well-being. As such, we highlighted five core competencies: a positive sense of self, self-control, decision-making skills, a moral system of belief, and prosocial connectedness. Our intent was to be inclusive enough to allow integration of different areas of emphasis within each type of risk behavior depending on the specific theories and processes that had guided previous research.

However, rather than delineating the core competencies and designing empirical studies to examine their relation to multiple outcomes prospectively, in some sense the authors were asked to work backward in order to fit prior research into this framework. Consequently, the competencies may have seemed a bit forced or perhaps a bit vague at some places in the volume. In addition, a lack of significant empirical findings may have been due to a lack of research in that area. For instance, few studies have examined the role of a moral system of belief in predicting early school leaving. But it may also be that some competencies are specific to some behaviors. For instance, a moral system of belief should be most relevant for violence and behaviors that harm others rather than behaviors that primarily harm the self.

Working forward requires that we examine the relative strength of each competency across multiple behaviors in order to identify the best approaches to prevention programming. For example, in a related study, Kim, Guerra, and Williams (2008) examined the role of a positive sense of self, self-control, decision making, and prosocial connectedness in predicting problem and health behaviors in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents. Across these competencies, low self-control emerged as the strongest single predictor of problem behaviors and poor physical health outcomes.

With the exception of Chapter Six by Naudeau, Cunningham, Lundberg, and McGinnis, the chapter authors were asked to link the core competencies to a particular problem behavior. Although we proposed that the five core competencies reflect markers of social and emotional competence for adolescents that can reduce risk for multiple problem behaviors, we did not specify how they are linked to adjustment. This was complicated by a relative lack of specificity regarding psychological and behavioral markers of adjustment. In part, this is due to a lack of agreement on what it means to be successful in general or within a specific domain. For example, although the term success at school is commonly used by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, a concise definition is lacking. Rather, most researchers operationalize school success as the absence of academic problems, truant behavior, or behavior problems at school.

Delineating more precise markers of healthy adjustment also has repercussions for specifying the acceptable boundaries for risk behaviors and directing preventive efforts. Several of the chapter authors acknowledged that some level of involvement in or experimentation with risk behavior is normative during adolescence (for instance, sexual activity, use of alcohol or other drugs, skipping school, and minor delinquency). This suggests that
it is important to identify developmentally appropriate involvement in these risk domains and to differentiate prediction of normative experimentation from prediction of more serious levels of risk behaviors that are cause for concern and warrant a significant expenditure of prevention resources.

The central focus of this volume is on illustrating how the five individual-level competencies are linked specifically to four discrete problem behaviors and more generally to positive youth development. Our attention to individual competencies was not meant to minimize the significance of developmental and contextual influences on these emerging competencies. Many of the chapters specifically discuss how competencies unfold within specific contexts. For example, in Chapter Four, Haegerich and Tolan highlight the importance of families, peers, schools, culture, and society as socializing agents that can influence adolescents' core competencies and their substance use. Still, studies typically have focused on contextual predictors and outcomes or individual predictors and outcomes rather than on how contextual predictors influence individual predictors such as core competencies and, in turn, affect problem behavior and adjustment. A suggested next step is to examine more fully the context-competency-behavior link across time, setting, and culture.

We hope that this volume makes a small contribution to an ongoing dialogue that creates linkages within the field of youth problem behaviors and builds bridges between risk prevention and positive youth development approaches. Although we agree that problem free does not mean prepared, we propose that a common focus on core competencies can help youth become both problem free and prepared. Considering these as shared outcomes rather than casting them as rival approaches should ultimately result in integrated and coordinated policies and programs that benefit youth worldwide.

References

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