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PURPOSE, SELF-CONCEPT AND PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIOR IN ADOLESCENTS: THE MEDIATOR EFFECT OF SELF-CONCEPT ON RELATIONSHIP OF PURPOSE AND BEHAVIOR

Zahra VEDADIAN¹, Hamid Reza AGHAMOHAMMADIAN SHARBAF^{1*}, Hossein KARESHKI²

¹ Department of Clinical Psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran,

² Associate Professor of Department of Education, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran.

***Corresponding Author**

ABSTRACT

This paper aimed to examine the relationship between purpose, self-concept and problematic behavior in adolescents. However, we know about purpose is a central life aim that organizes and guides behaviors and linked to positive outcome of development, there is a little acknowledge about mutual connection among it to levels of self-concept and effects of this relation on behavior. Associations between purpose, self-concept and behavior were examined in a sample of 115 adolescent in the high school (Mean age 17.58 years; SD 0.48). Hierarchical linear regression examined effects of self-concept and purposefulness as a predictor of healthy behavior. Results revealed that self-concept moderated the association between purposefulness and healthier behavior in adolescents. Adolescents with high level of self-concept reported greater commitment to purpose and show the adaptable behavior in family and school. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: Purpose, Self-Concept, Problematic Behavior, Adolescent

INTRODUCTION

Studies in positive youth developments declare that young people need to construct higher-order abstractions that involved the meaningful integration of single abstractions in the self-portrait (Malin et al., 2013), a compass, guiding young people's lives in positive directions (Schulenberg et al., 2011); they need to a purpose. While the "purpose" construct has been defined in a number of ways, definitions tend to agree on the aspect of an overarching direction in life (Blanttner et al., 2013). The construct of purpose typically encompasses: 1) aim, as a quality indicating intention towards a long-term goal and, 2) engagement, as an internal motivation to be active in pursuit of the personally meaningful aim (Bronk, 2008; Bronk et al., 2010; Damon et al., 2003; Moran, 2009). Damon, Mariano & Bronk (2003) have also emphasized a third dimension to this construct – contribution, as a goal that seeks to contribute positively to society. They defined the purpose as a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self (Damon, 2003). This definition includes three important components: first, Purpose is a goal, but it is more stable and far-reaching than lower-level objectives such as "to get a good dress to wear to the party" or "to find a seat in that crowded restaurant" (Hill et al., 2015), second, Purpose is a key part of our own personal search for meaning, but it also has an external quality, a desire to make a difference in the world, to contribute to matters beyond (and larger than) our own self-interest (Damon et al., 2003), and finally, Purpose is directed at

accomplishments, or ends, towards which one can make progress. The ends may be material or nonmaterial, and they may be reachable or non-reachable (Damon, 2003). The essential characteristic of the ends is not their concreteness or attainability but the sense of direction they provide (Damon & Mariano, 2008).

Purpose is important because it is found to be associated with a network of positive outcomes in youth, and has been classified by some as a developmental asset and as an indicator of youth thriving (e.g., see Yuen et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2015; Bronk et al., 2010).

Empirical research in the field of positive psychology has increasingly begun to focus on the search for purpose in life (Hill & et al., 2015). A growing body of theoretical and empirical literature suggests that having a purpose in life contributes to optimal human development. For example, purpose is an important feature of resilient youth (Mariano, 2014) and is considered a developmental asset for positive youth development (Damon & Mariano, 2008; Furrow, Strauss, 2007). Youth with purpose are psychologically healthier than their peers (Damon et al., 2003), and the same appears to hold for adults (Rrilly, 2013). Seligman (2002) offers an indirect linking of purpose and subjective wellbeing. Studies that examine internally-focused conceptions of purpose and related concepts as well as studies that conflate purpose and meaning demonstrate a positive correlation between purpose and life satisfaction (Malin et al., 2008; Steger et al., 2009).

Having a sense of purpose has been associated with a number of key developmental outcomes in adolescence, such as higher self-esteem and academic achievement (Damon et al., 2003), person-centered characteristics including virtues such as hope (Hill & et al., 2015), empathy, generosity, authenticity (Burrow et al., 2010) being humble, open, hopeful, and grateful (Bronk, 2009). In contrast, a lack of purpose can create unsettled feelings and serve as a stressor for adolescents (Bronk, & Finch, 2010). But a little researches study the effectiveness factors on purposefulness by focusing on social supports and spirituality (Mariano & Damon, 2008) instead of inner personality factors.

According to Seligman (2002), there are three primary paths to happiness. The first route to happiness involves experiencing as many of life's pleasures as possible and results in short-term happiness. The other two routes produce longer lasting, deeper forms of contentment. The second, also called the good life, involves becoming deeply involved in those activities in which one excels and losing oneself in the process, and the third, the meaningful life, involves pursuing a path in which a cause or an institution supplies a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself. Pursuing a purpose involves aspects of both the good life and the meaningful life, and in this way purpose is indirectly linked to subjective well-being (Blattner et al., 2013). Purpose also appears to play a role in overcoming life's challenges. Victor Frankl (1959) was one of the first psychologists to propose that having a high-level belief system, such as a purpose in life, enabled people to endure life's hardships. Moreover, understanding more about the subjective experience of purpose will have important implications for fostering and supporting the development of purpose in youth and adults alike (Kings et al., 2017).

With regards to youth, Erikson (1994) reported that purpose helps young people successfully navigate and resolve their identity crises. In the same aria, Scholars indicated that the development of one's sense of purpose parallels Marcia's identity development (1980) categories: fore closure, diffusion, moratorium, and achievement (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Steger et al., 2006). For example, a young person with a fore closed purpose may adopt her parent's



ideas about her purpose without searching for her own unique purpose in life (low search, high commitment). Similarly, a diffuse purpose corresponds with low search and low commitment, a purpose in moratorium corresponds with high search and low commitment, and an achieved purpose corresponds with high search and high commitment (Burrow et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2006). That is, an achieved sense of purpose involves committing to a purpose while simultaneously maintaining an open-minded attitude through an ongoing search (Burrow et al., 2010). The developmental stress of searching for purpose coupled with the instability of not yet committing to a purpose, may render the moratorium category of purpose development most stressful for youth (Marsh et al., 2003). Transitioning into adulthood requires adopting a system of meaning, including new goals and self-standards; at the same time, those transitioning to adulthood increasingly delay a commitment to long-term goals and self-standards (Malin et al., 2013). These self-standards can be systems of meaning (Damon, 2003).

Given the summary of literature of investigations on purpose and its effects on positive youth development, this paper focuses on the mutual influence of self-concept and purposefulness. In his investigation into the role of purpose in young lives, Damon and his team of researchers (2008) found just young peoples can express a clear vision of where they want to go, what they want accomplish in their life, and why, that can express a clear vision of who are they, what they interest, and what talents they have. In other words, the young peoples need to have a rich self-concept to building the stable and purposeful identity (Schutte et al., 2016).

Self-concept refers 'to the composite ideas, feelings, and attitudes people have about themselves' (Hilgard, Atkinson, and Atkinson, 1979: p.605; quote to Demo, 1992). Self-concept is also defined by Purkey (1988) as the sum of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence (Lourinho et al., 2016). Most researchers agree that self-concept is generally characterized by orderliness and harmony (Damon and Hart, 1991). It is this organized quality of self-concept that gives consistency to the personality (Damon and Hart, 1982). The idea behind this view is that if it were not organized and changed readily we would not have individuality; we would lack a consistent and dependable personality. Success and failure have an impact on self-concept making it dynamic and ever developing (Damon, 2009). In the healthy personality, there is constant assimilation of new ideas and expulsion of old ideas throughout life, which make it dynamic (Damon, 2004).

During the adolescent years, a certain amount of soul-searching and experimentation is healthy (Damon, 2008). Adolescence is a transitory period of development, a kind of way station on the road to a mature self-identity (Brown, 2017). This is what the renowned psychologist Erik Erikson (1994) once described as a constructive "moratorium" from reality. And yes, this "identity formation" task in some cases can take years of postponing choices in order to resolve the task successfully (Damon, 2008). Yet the postponements of many young people today have taken on a troubling set of characteristics, and chief among them is that so many youth do not seem to be moving toward any resolution. Their delay is characterized more by indecision than by motivated reflection, more by confusion than by the pursuit of clear goals, more by ambivalence than by determination (Lu et al., 2017). Directionless drift is not a constructive moratorium in either a developmental or a societal sense. It is not that there is a critical period for the acquisition of a fruitful direction in life (Damon, 2008). But it is the



case that excessive delay beyond the period of readiness creates the serious risk that the young person may give up altogether on the tasks of finding a positive direction, sustaining that direction, and acquiring the skills needed to achieve the directional goals (Kings et al., 2017). The clinical observation of Erikson and his followers demonstrate that, when young people find nothing to dedicate themselves to while growing up, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to acquire motivation belief systems later in life (Wong & Vllacher, 2016). The results is a sense of “drift” that can lead to personal as well as social pathologies (Coelho & Romao, 2017). Researches has shown that the personal effects of purposefulness may include self-absorption, depression (Lourinho et al., 2016), addiction, and a variety of internalizing and externalizing problems (Pyankova et al., 2016).

Helping young people to provide higher-order labels that integrate opposing attributes, may avert some of the distress and increase the self-respect of them (Ebesutani et al., 2018). Knowing about their-selves, gives the young people the sense of autonomy and freedom of choice (Damon, 1992) and makes they have more opportunity to select performance domains in with they is successful (Friedman, 2000).

The aim of present study was to show the situation of today’s adolescents in purposefulness and analyzed reciprocal influences of purpose and self-concept with regard to healthy and problematic behavior. The question is whether is the way that help to young people to define their goals and find their purpose in life? In other words, the present study sought to address this questions:

- Did the relationship exist among purpose in life and self-concept with regard to problematic behavior?
- Could self-concept predict the strength of purposefulness in direction the behavior on adaptable manner?

METHOD

This study used a cross-sequential design, analyzing data collected from measures of study. Hierarchical liner regression was used to assess the relationship of purposefulness and behavior and the mediate role of self-concept in this relation.

Participants: Participants in this study included 115 girls (51.31%, mean= 18.28, SD=1.2) and boys (48.69%, mean= 18.8, SD=1.1) in twelfth graders from government schools of Center of North Korasan in Iran. This sample was selected because purpose is a construct that rarely appears in its full form before adolescence (Damon, 2008). All of students were interviewed and confidentially completed the questionnaires during an arranged time in the school. Criteria for selection into the present study included having available question’s data. 120 participants were excluded due to having missing items, yielding a final sample size of 115 adolescents.

Procedure: Damon and Hart’s (1988) interview was individually administered to each participant by an investigator in a quiet room. The interviews, lasting between 30 and 40 minutes, were audio-taped and later transcribed. Before interview, students had completed the Youth self-report and purpose in life questionnaires. Also, a self-report demographic questionnaire was completed by each respondent.

Measures:

Youth self-report (YSR): The Youth Self Report is a prominent and widely used youth self-report measure for the assessment of emotional and behavioral problems among youth ages 11-18. The 119 items on the YSR are rated as Not True (0), somewhat or Sometimes True (1), or Very True or Often True (2). The YSR developers intended it to be completed by youth with a mental age of 10 and fifth-grade reading skills (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001; quote to Ivarson & Broberg, 2002). Validity and reliability of the YSR broad-band, syndrome and DSM-oriented scales have been documented (Achenbach, 1991), and extensive normative data are available for children ages 11 to 18. It covering different symptoms/behaviors each to be rated on a three-point scale (two indicates that the symptom is present most of the time or applies well, one indicates that the symptom is present some of the time or applies to some extent, and 0 indicates the absence of symptom or problem behavior). All ratings refer to symptoms or problems experienced during the preceding six months. It has been used with more than 5000 Swedish adolescents in a normative study (Broberg et al., 2001). The YSR total problem scale can be divided into nine syndrome subscales and externalizing and internalizing behavior. The reliability of the Swedish YSR has recently been studied by Broberg et al.; internal consistency was adequate for most syndrome scales and good for the two broadband dimensions (Internalizing/Externalizing). Several international studies support the reliability of the YSR (Ebesutani et al., 2018; Ivarsson et al., 2002).

Purpose in life test (PIL): Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964, quote to Schulenberg, Schnetzer & Buchanan, 2010) developed the most widely used measure of purpose to date. Their Purpose in Life Test improves upon the Frankl Questionnaire, and as such it relies on Frankl's conception of purpose (1959), or "the ontological significance of life from the point of view of the experiencing individual", and tests Frankl's Will to Meaning assumption (Crumbaugh and Maholick 1964, 1981, quote to Bronk, 2014). In particular, the survey assesses the degree to which individuals strive to make meaning of their conscious experiences and the degree to which that meaning leaves individuals feeling as though their lives are worthwhile and significant. The Purpose in Life test consists of 20 items, each rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (low purpose) to 7 (high purpose). Total scores can range from 20 (low purpose) to 140 (high purpose). The scale has also shown good validity in a variety of studies. For example, PIL scores have been found to correlate satisfactorily with the therapist Ratings of purpose in life among clinical patients (Crumbaugh, 1968; Kinnier et al., 1994; quote to Schulenberg et al., 2010; Crumbaugh & Henrion, 2001), and with ministers' ratings of degree of meaning and purpose exhibited by parishioners. Low PIL scores have been found to be associated with suicidal ideation and drug use (Kinnier et al., 1994; quote to Yuen et al., 2015).

Youth self-concept interview: The interview contains seven main items that were presented in a fixed order (Ivarsson et al., 2002). Additional questions, or probes, were asked to clarify the meaning and reasoning behind the initial responses. Probes were given until the participant repeated a response, said "I don't know", or showed frustration or signs of waning attention. The transcripts were coded by a rater blind to the participants'. The raters followed the coding scheme and procedures described below. Each transcript was first divided into units of scoring, called "chunks". A chunk is defined as a self-characteristic mentioned by the participant, together with responses to the related probe questions, as well as any further discussion of the specific characteristic that immediately followed the probed responses. Chunks were derived



from responses throughout the interview, and were coded into four aspects of the self-concept (Categories of self-concept), then rated at one of four levels, based on Damon and Hart's (1991) coding scheme and scoring criteria. They were a descriptive data about each chunks and a weighted average for all four levels. In this study we just used the weighted average for all students.

RESULTS

To examine the relationship among self-concept, purposefulness and problematic behavior in adolescents, two primary analyses were conducted. First, correlations were run to access the relationship among the purpose and self-concept. Second, multiple regression tested whether the self-concept and purposeful can predict healthy / unhealthy behavior. There weren't significant differences between boys and girls on the PIL, total YSR-score and the YSR syndrome scales so in prediction of problematic behavior of adolescents, both the girls and boys are analyzed as a student ($P=0.05$).

Table 1: independent t test between variables in boys and girls

variable	mean		SD		t	df	significant
	boy	girl	boy	girl			
YSR (Internalized)	58.69	60.89	9.90	7.53	-1.33	112	0.18
YSR (externalized)	51.69	51.55	6.35	9.33	.08	112	0.93
YSR (total)	65.89	67.96	7.63	7.85	-1.43	112	0.15
YSCI (score of mean of levels)	2.50	2.46	0.34	0.35	0.56	112	0.57
PIL	81.49	81.88	31.68	27.58	-0.07	112	0.94

$P=0.05$

Correlation between the PIL (20 item form), YSCI (mean of scores in youth self-concept interview) and YSR (total score and internalizing/externalizing subscales) are presented in table two. The results show the purposeful and self-concept was significantly positively correlated ($r = .627$, $P = 0.01$) and both negatively correlated with YSR subscales. The score of PIL had a ($R= 0.47$) negative correlation with internalizing behavior, ($R=0.37$) negative correlation with externalizing behavior and ($R= 0.57$) negative correlation with total subscale of problematic behavior of YSR. Also, the mean of levels of YSCI was negative correlated with internalizing behavior ($R=0.55$), externalizing behavior ($R=0.44$) and Total score of problematic behavior of YSR ($R=0.60$). As could see, the prediction variables of this study have a desirable correlation with the criterion variable. Descriptive statistics and correlational analyses can be found in table two.

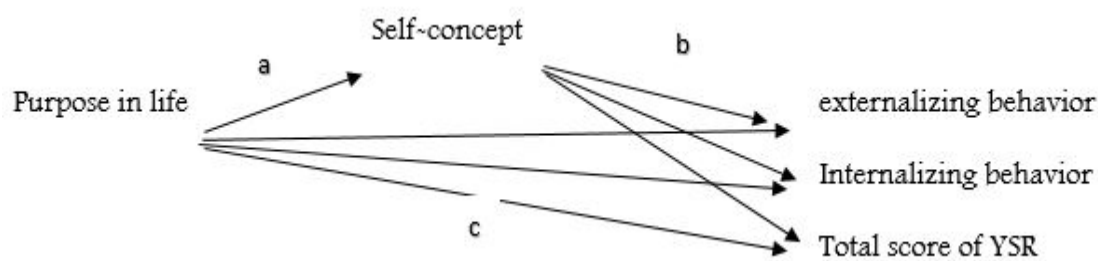
Table 2: Pearson correlation of PIL, YSR and YSCI in 115 students

	PIL	YSCI	YSR (internalized)	YSR (externalized)	YSR (Total)
	Mean 81.40 SD 29.53	Mean 2.48 SD .34	Mean 59.87 SD 8.76	Mean 51.62 SD 6.97	Mean 67.01 SD 7.77
PIL		0.627	-0.47	-0.37	-0.57
YSCI	0.627		-0.55	-0.44	-0.60

Correlation significant at the 0.01 (one tailed)

Regression were profound to assess association between purpose and self-concept as an independent variables and problematic behavior as dependent variable (see table tree). In order to evaluation the problematic behavior, this study just used the score of internalizing, externalizing and total behavior in Achenbach's Youth Self Report. As one would expect the purpose and self-concept were both important contributors to the total variance.

Following the guidelines of Baron and Kenny (1985; quoted from Reilly, 2013), this analysis requires one to assess whether the predictor variable (Identified Purpose) predicts the outcome variable (problematic behavior). Second, the predictor variable needs to predict the mediator (self-concept). Third, the mediator must predict the outcome variable. Finally, if there is a mediator effect, the regression coefficient of the predictor on the outcome should decrease when controlling for the mediator.



Hierarchical regression were conducted to determine whether the PSCI is the mediation of relationship between purpose and behavior.

According to the table three, the score of Purpose in life questionnaire can predict the 0.33% of variances and with mediate of the mean of levels of self-concept interview can predict the 0.33% of variances in internalizing behavior ($R=0.57$, $R^2= 0.33$, $R^2_{adj}=0.32$). The coefficient for PIL is ($B=-0.06$). So for every unit increase in PIL, we expect an approximately -0.06-point decrease in the internalizing behavior, holding the other prediction variable constant. This result is the same for externalizing behavior ($B= -0.04$, $F=28.21$, $P\leq 0.001$). The coefficient for PIL in total score of problematic behavior is -0.08. So for every unit increase in score of PIL, - 0.08%-unit decrease in total score of problematic behavior ($R=0.65$, $R^2= 0.43$, $R^2_{adj}=0.42$).

Table 3: prediction of problematic behavior according to the purpose and self-concept

Predictor variables	Externalized behavior variable (Young Self-report)				Internalized behavior variable (Young Self-report)				Total score of problematic behavior (Young Self-report)			
	B	SE	β	t	B	SE	β	t	B	SE	β	t
Constant and PIL												
Constant	75.25	5.13		14.64	91.84	5.21		17.62	96.96	4.29		22.71
PIL	-0.04	0.02	-0.16	-1.51	-0.06	0.02	-0.21	-2.12	-0.08	-0.02	-0.31	-3.46
Constant, YSCI and PIL												
Constant	77.58	4.92		15.74	95.18	5.04		18.85	101.41	4.26		23.77
PIL	-10.42	1.96	-0.44	-5.31	-14.18	2.00	-0.55	-7.05	-13.82	1.69	-0.60	- 8.14
YSCI	-8.04	2.50	-.34	-3.21	-10.79	2.53	-0.42	-4.25	-9.30	2.08	0.40	-4.47

a. Dependent variable: YSR

P \leq 0.001



As it can be seen, these results have changed when the variable of self-concept is added. The mediation of variable of self-concept made stranger the effect of prediction of the PIL on problematic behavior ($B_{\text{externalized}} = -10.42$, $t = -5.31$; $B_{\text{internalized}} = -14.18$, $t = -7.05$; $B_{\text{total score}} = -13.82$, $t = -8.14$; $P < 0.001$). As it showed, self-concept variable could predict the -8.04%, -10.79% and -4.47% of variances in respectively, externalized, internalized and total problematic behavior of adolescents. The self-concept score mediated the relationship between purposefulness and behavior. Among students, a significant negative emerged between the purpose scores and internalized ($\beta = -0.21$, $t = -2.12$, $P < 0.03$) and total ($\beta = -0.31$, $t = -3.46$, $P < 0.001$) subscales of youth self-report. The self-concept negatively predicted the all of subscales of YSR (externalized: $\beta = -0.34$, $t = -3.21$, $P < 0.002$; internalized: $\beta = -0.42$, $t = -4.25$, $P < 0.001$; Total score: $\beta = -0.40$, $t = -4.47$, $P < 0.001$). It means, purpose in life in interaction with self-concept, can be a better prediction variable for scores of youth self-report subscales in problematic behavior in adolescents.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to discover the mediator effect of self-concept on relation of purposefulness and behavior of adolescents. Many studies showed the effects of purpose on emotion, behavior, thoughts, motivation and will to success in adolescents and young adult, even though on well-being in adults (Bronk, 2010; Veiga & Leite, 2016; Scattini et al., 2017). Also, there is an expended literature about identity and mental health in adolescents and self-awareness in adult and its effect on positive young development (Steger, 2008). But none of this studies mentioned to relation of purpose with self-concept. Self-concept is a set of structured self-attitude that is relatively stable and characteristic of an individual (Young & Shapka, 2016). Self-concept, like other dimensions of personality, is a function of interacting biological, developmental, and social processes across the life course. It is acquired through patterns of interaction with others and is modified as children and adults develop new cognitive and intellectual capabilities and confront new social demands and processes (Wong & Burkley, 2017). Self-concept preparing the future plan with providing the self-knowledge about capabilities, talents and favorites. The present study provide evidence that self-concept can be the good mediate in relation between purposefulness and behavior. It showed that self-concept can strength this relationship and help to students to plan their life into their goals that are adaptable with their talents and attitudes that make them happy and wellbeing. The important of purpose and its role in life of adult and process of shaping identity in adolescents in many studies is improved. The literature of purpose in life support an association between purposeless life and mental health problems as well as between meaningful life and having a purpose in life and psychological wellbeing. Issues conceded integral to purpose and meaning in life are having a sense of clear aims in life, a sense of achieving life goals, a belief that one's daily activities are worthwhile and meaningful, a sense that one's life has coherence and meaning, and enthusiasm and excitement about life. Also, it is obvious that searching for or having a purpose in life help to integrating the identity in adolescence (Damon, 2004). Coherent identity that is a singe of healthy people, have two necessary components: self-awareness and commitment. There is a lot of study that examine the ways that could improve the self-awareness or commitment and a large collection of studies on identity, wellbeing and



self-concept. But none of these studies had attention to relation between this awareness and commitment. The innovation of current study is to be considered the role of self-concept on reinforcement of purpose in life.

Results from the present study supported the hypothesis and point to relation between purposefulness and self-concept. The findings suggest that self-concept had an effect on relation between purpose and behavior. The more the person can realize about her/his attitude, capabilities, talents, interests and favorites, the more can determine realistic goals for herself/himself and would have more satisfaction in every day doing and had a better capacity to planning for the future. Therefore, the persons with deeply level of self-concept, would be hopefully about whatever they doing and know the path that is moving on it and the ultimate goal that try to achieve than the persons who pursuit of the goals that the others or the culture prepared for them.

Given the lines of potential research described above, it is clear that the present studies are just the tip of the iceberg in research to support the research about purpose. Further studies in how can increase the sense of purpose and self-awareness is necessary. They are many researches about importance of purpose in life and its effect on positive development in young but the studies that mentioned the ways that can fill this vacuum is limited. It would seem appropriate that interventional studies be conducted.

Appendix

Self-concept youth interview

Items in the self-understanding interview

1: self-definition

- What are you like?
- What kind of person are you? What does that say about you?
- What are you not like? What does say about you?

2. Self-evaluation

- What are you especially proud of about yourself?
- What do you like most about yourself? What does that say about you?

3. Self in past and present

- Do you think you'll be the same or different five years from now? What will be the same? What will be different? Why is that important?
- How about when you're an adult? Probe as in (a)
- How about five years ago? Probe as in (a)
- How do you when you were a baby?

4. Continuity

- If you change from year to year, how do you know it's still always you? Is that an important thing to say about you? Why? In what ways do you stay the same?

5. Agency

- How did get to be the way you are?

6. Self-interest

- If you could have three wishes, what would they be? Why would you wish for that?
- Are those things you hope for most in life? What else do you hope for in life? Why do you hope for that?



- What do you want to be like?
- What kind of a person do you want to be? Why do you want to be that way?
- What is good for you? Why is that good for you?

7. Distinctness

- Do you think there is anyone else how exactly like you?

What makes you different from anyone you know? What difference does that make? Why is that important? In what other ways are you different? Are you completely different or just partly different? How do you know?

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