The Ebb & Flow of Perceived Control from the Late Teens to Middle Adulthood

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Personal Control

- **What is it?** Individual’s capacity to influence their lives
  - *Perceived control*: beliefs about how much we can influence events in our lives
  - Other labels & variations: self-efficacy, personal mastery, locus of control, learned helplessness

- **Why does it matter?** Perceived personal control has been associated with
  - Better physical & mental health
  - Higher life satisfaction & general well-being
  - Greater longevity
Perceived Control across Lifespan

- Social learning theory: control is a learned view of the self and the environment
  - So, subject to change with aging

- What do changes in perceived control across the lifespan look like?
  - Mirowsky’s hypothetical life-course trajectory
    - inverted U-shape
    - peak in middle age
  - Alternative forms?
    - cyclical
    - peak in early adulthood
Perceived Control across Lifespan: Cross-sectional evidence

Lachman & Firth, 2004

What happens in my life is often beyond my control
Perceived Control across Lifespan: Cross-sectional evidence

Mirowsky & Ross, 2007
Perceived Control across Lifespan: Cross-sectional evidence

Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2013
Perceived Control across Lifespan

**BUT**, cross-sectional findings problematic

- Interindividual differences OR intraindividual change?

**STUDY GOAL 1**

Tracking individual’s perceived control over time necessary to identify lifespan trajectories within individuals.
Perceived Control: Antecedents

**Early life resources**

- Mirowsky’s hypothetical life-course trajectory
  - Early life successful experiences $\Rightarrow$ accumulation of perceived control
- More early resources $\Rightarrow$ more opportunities to exercise control
Perceived Control: Antecedents

Early life resources

- Cross-sectional evidence: parental education positively linked to perceived control
- Other resources?

Identifying the effects of early life resources on changes in perceived control necessary to examine their persistence.

STUDY GOAL 2
Perceived Control: Antecedents

Education

- Learned-effectiveness Hypothesis:
  - Education $\rightarrow$ Control
    (Mirowsky & Ross, 1998)

- Cross-sectional evidence: Schieman, 2001
Perceived Control: Antecedents

Education

- Cross-sectional evidence: Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2013

**BUT**

- What is the directionality of effects across time?

**STUDY GOAL 3**
The Present Study

Goal: Use longitudinal data, collected over 25 years (age 18 to 43) to answer:

1. What is the average trajectory of change in perceived control from the late teens to middle adulthood?

2. Do patterns of change in perceived control differ by parental education and high school SES?

3. Do trajectories of change in perceived control covary with trajectories of change in post-secondary education (PSE)?
The Present Study

Sample
- 983 grade-12 students (age 18 at baseline, 47% women)
- 28% of participants’ parents had PSE degree

Procedures
- Recruited from six Edmonton high schools
- Data collected by questionnaire, phone, or online
Measures

Perceived Control
- I have little control over the things that happen to me
- 1 (strongly agree) – 5 (strongly disagree)

Parental Education
- No university degree (0) vs. At least one university degree (1)

High School SES
- Working class (0) vs. Middle class (1)

Participants’ Education
- Number of years in postsecondary education (PSE) as full-time student since finishing of high school
Results: Question 1 (Average Trajectory)

- Latent Growth Modeling (LGM)

$\chi^2 = 36.63 \ (24, \ 971); \ p = .048; \ RMSEA = .02 \ (.00-.04); \ CFI = .98$
Results: Question 2 (Parents’ Education)

- **Multigroup Analysis of LGM**

  Initial levels and change over time in perceived control differed by parents’ education.

\[ \chi^2 = 57.91 \text{ (42, 903); } p = .052; \text{ RMSEA} = .03 \text{ (.00-.05); } \text{CFI} = .97 \]
Results: Question 3 (Own Education)

- Parallel Process Modeling

\[ \chi^2 = 351.70 \) (75, 903); \) \( p = .00; \) RMSEA = .06 (.06-.07); \) CFI = .90; \) SRMR = .09.\]
The Ebb and Flow

- Patterns of change in perceived control over time are more complex than shown by cross-sectional studies.

- Perceived control seems to peak or plateau at about age 25, at least when considered intraindividual change into the 40s.

- Education matters for patterns of change in perceived control.
Perceived Control & Education

- Parents’ education and high school SES matter for perceived control
  - Different resources available for individual as they face challenges

- Changes in own PSE are associated with changes in perceived control

BUT, directionality of association does NOT support learned-effectiveness hypothesis
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Q & A