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## Development of the Personal Responsibility Scale for adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

Increasing interest by policy makers and educators in enhancing the non-cognitive factors that impact on the wellbeing of young people across the school years requires valid and reliable measurement scales. This paper reports the psychometric development of the Personal Responsibility Scale drawing on a preliminary 34-item measure developed using data from focus groups with secondary students in Australia. This scale was then administered to 513 students across Years 9–12. Exploratory factor analysis identified three factors, 'personal accountability', 'behavioural and emotional control', and 'cognitive control'. Structural equation modelling was used to examine the congeneric measurement models for these factors. The multidimensional nature of the personal responsibility construct was then examined through multilevel confirmatory factor analysis. These analyses supported a three-factor structure to propose a final 15-item scale. Additional validation requirements, future research possibilities, and implications of this study are addressed.

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### Introduction

Internationally, interest in the social and emotional development of adolescent students has received increased attention in recent years because of increased awareness of the complexity of the worlds in which young people currently live (Glass, 2013; Trosset, 2013; West et al., 2014). Educational policy has increasingly emphasised the importance of students' abilities to be resilient, demonstrate self-control, and demonstrate social and personal responsibility (ACARA, 2015; Lovat, Clement, Dally, & Toomey, 2010; MCEETYA, 2008). These abilities are often labelled non-cognitive skills in the research literature (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015) and there is growing evidence that these skills can be taught to young people (O'Neill, 2012; Piquero, Jennings, & Farrington, 2010). However, Duckworth and Yeager (2015) argue that robust measures of non-cognitive skills are lacking and this hampers research efforts in this important area. Without the development of robust measures to quantify such constructs as personal responsibility, researchers and schools are limited in their ability to demonstrate the effectiveness (or otherwise) of their intervention efforts to develop these skills. This foundational study details the development of a measure of personal responsibility for adolescents.

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## Definition and measurement of personal responsibility

Within the educational and psychological literature, the concept of personal responsibility has been discussed since at least the 1950s. Despite this, a clear definition of the construct has been difficult to determine, largely due to the disparate nature of earlier work. An early theoretical framework within which to understand personal responsibility was developed by Heider (1958), outlining that personal responsibility is determined on the basis of causality (what was done) and expectations (what should have been done). More recently, a new perspective was outlined by Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, and Doherty (1994), who conceptualised the Triangle Model of Responsibility which highlighted that the construct involved combining the strength of three elements being prescriptions (rules for conduct), events (units of action), and identity (actor's roles, qualities, commitments, and pretensions). Alternatively, within the context of enhancing personal and social responsibility in American school students through physical education classes, Hellison (1985, 2003) proposed a values-based model called the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility model (TPSRM). Within this model, personal responsibility included demonstrating self-control, participating and persisting (effort) in familiar and new activities, and investing and taking increased responsibility for one's physical activity levels and overall wellbeing.

Definitions of personal responsibility have also varied across time and research studies, making comparisons difficult. For example, Mergler (2007, p.66) defined personal responsibility as "the ability to regulate one's own thoughts, feelings and behaviour, along with a willingness to hold oneself accountable for the choices made and the social and personal outcomes generated". In earlier work in education, Lickona (1991, p. 68) defined personal responsibility broadly, outlining that the construct was about "taking care of self and others, fulfilling our obligations, contributing to our communities, alleviating suffering, and building a better world". Focussing on more immediate classroom behaviours, Lewis (2004) defined personal responsibility as the frequency with which students engaged in responsible classroom behaviours including protecting students' and teachers' rights associated with learning and emotional and physical safety. More recently, Smithkirai, Longthong, and Peijsel (2015) defined personal responsibility as a person's belief that one is the master of one's own life; one is aware of and chooses one's own choices and goals; and one is willing to hold oneself accountable for one's behaviour and its consequences.

The empirical research examining personal responsibility is sparse (Linley & Maltby, 2009). Of the scales that do exist, most have been created for use with adults (Martel, McKelvie, & Standing, 1987; Singg & Ader, 2001; Smithkirai, Longthong, & Peijsel, 2015). A number of efforts to develop measures have been within the context of physical education (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2012; Li, Wright, Rukavina, & Pickering, 2008; Watson, Newton, & Kim, 2003). In addition, most researchers have viewed personal responsibility as a unidimensional construct (Martel et al., 1987; Singg & Ader, 2001). Swaner (2005) argued that personal responsibility needs to be viewed as a multidimensional construct that includes behavioural, cognitive, emotional and moral components. Advancement of this field of inquiry can only occur when researchers clearly identify what aspects of personal responsibility they are seeking to measure, and develop a consistent definition and a strong measure that allow for cross-study comparisons of findings across contexts that involve different populations.

Within the Australian education system, government policy demands that schools seek to enhance the personal responsibility of students (ACARA, 2015; MCEETYA, 2008). Indeed, it is suggested that a central focus of schooling should be the development of young people who demonstrate self-awareness, social consideration and the willingness to take responsibility for the choices they make. A focus in education on the importance of personal responsibility is welcome, however, we can only measure, understand and develop these capacities of young people when we have a clear understanding of what the construct involves as well as reliable and valid measures.

## The current study

The current study extends our earlier work (Mergler, 2007; Mergler & Patton, 2007) to develop a Personal Responsibility Scale for use with adolescents. While there are increasing expectations that schools can develop such non-cognitive skills in young people, the outcomes of their efforts to do so can only be assessed when well developed and empirically robust measurement scales are available. The current study documents the psychometric properties of the Personal Responsibility Scale.

## Method and results

### Item generation

The initial set of items created for the measure were drawn from focus group data of 20 Australian Grade 11 students, of which 13 were female and 7 were male, and 10 secondary school teachers, of which 7 were female and 3 were male. Targeted questions were used to generate discussion including, 'If you broke personal responsibility down into its key parts, what would they be?' and 'What in your life do you take personal responsibility for?' Each focus group was audiotaped, and the lead author of the current paper transcribed each focus group, and used Krueger's (1998) content analysis continuum model to group common notions and identify key themes. Five key themes were identified, indicating that for these participants personal responsibility included internal accountability, a consideration of consequences, self-management and self-control, cognitive awareness, and social responsibility. As these areas were emphasised by the participants they were targeted as key areas from

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