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Toward Equity-Oriented Assessment of Social and Emotional Learning: Examining Equivalence of Concepts and Measures

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Abstract

Cultural beliefs, values, and norms influence the frequency and display of behavior. Accordingly, broadening the operational definitions of social and emotional competencies and establishing the equivalence of measures are two necessary steps to ensure that current assessment tools are sensitive to cultural and contextual variations. The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to examine the risks associated with narrow definitions or assumptions of invariance, particularly as each pertains to the assessment of social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies among Black students in urban schools; and second, to consider the utility of prototype analysis in advancing transformative SEL research and practice.

Keywords

transformative social and emotional learning, prototype analysis, content validity, conceptual equivalence, culture-specific approach

Increased interest in the field of social and emotional learning (SEL) has yielded a range of programs designed to facilitate the acquisition and application of skills that enhance personal well-being, strengthen relationships, and

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promote academic success (Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). The majority of SEL programs seek to align with learning standards put forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a nonprofit entity that advocates and provides leadership for high-quality SEL programming. The CASEL framework identifies five core competencies that contribute to SEL: *self-awareness* (e.g., recognizing emotions, strengths, and values), *self-management* (e.g., regulating emotions and behaviors), *social awareness* (e.g., taking the perspective of and empathizing with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures), *relationship skills* (e.g., establishing and maintaining healthy relationships), and *responsible decision-making* (e.g., making constructive choices across varied situations; Weissberg et al., 2015). Although there is growing consensus regarding the positive outcomes associated with teaching, practicing, and reinforcing these skills, several challenges persist in addressing important issues of equity, context, representation, and reflection of diverse populations (Durlak et al., 2011; Jagers et al., 2019). Urban school districts have been identified as one particular school context in which existing SEL efforts may not be sufficiently differentiated to implement and evaluate with the necessary variation (Castro-Olivo, 2010; Farahmand et al., 2011). Compared with their suburban and rural counterparts, urban schools are more likely to serve racially and ethnically diverse populations from minoritized, economically disadvantaged backgrounds (often co-occurring demographic characteristics) and are frequently confronted with contextual stressors that are qualitatively different from student experiences in non-urban settings (Boutte, 2012; Graves et al., 2014). A meta-analytic review conducted by Farahmand and colleagues (2011) highlights this potential shortcoming by comparing the effectiveness of school-based programs targeting samples that were predominantly or exclusively low-income and urban to those similar in scope but targeting the broader population (i.e., youth from all racial/ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds). Results revealed reduced program effectiveness for low-income urban youth, suggesting that many available SEL programs may not adequately address the unique cultural influences and contextual factors experienced by this population. Consequently, the assumption of universality in SEL programs and tendency to rely on problem-based evaluation approaches with minoritized groups, including urban youth, has ultimately narrowed the definitions of student competencies and limited the generalizability of measurement tools (Jagers et al., 2019). When potential construct bias and conceptual invariance are overlooked, culturally and linguistically diverse students are more likely to be met with unwarranted experiences of cultural mismatch, discrimination, microaggressions, and implicit biases by peers and adults (A. Allen et al., 2013; Jagers et al., 2019). This, in turn, has been associated with

experiences of acculturative stress, stereotype threat, alienation, institutional mistrust, and disengagement, all of which undermine school success for students of color in urban districts (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Okonofua et al., 2016). Furthermore, the double segregation by race and socioeconomic status (SES) within the urban school context is also intertwined with *opportunity gaps*—or deficiencies in the foundational components of schools (e.g., teacher quality, teacher training, curriculum quality, digital divide)—which position these schools even farther away from the purported American belief of excellence and equity for all children (Hall Mark, 2013; Milner, 2013). To ensure SEL efforts do not exacerbate existing educational inequities or perpetuate context-neutral mind-sets and practice, it is important to consider how to develop, implement, and measure program efforts in ways that are aligned with the emergent needs and situational influences of stakeholders in urban education (Barnes, 2019; McCallops et al., 2019).

Recently, the concept of *transformative SEL* has emerged as a means to ground SEL in a focus on equity and promote conditions that support optimal human development regardless of circumstances or background (Jagers et al., 2019). To drive these efforts forward, Jagers and colleagues provided revisions to current definitions of each of the five CASEL domains, referred to as *equity elaborations*. This framing of the competencies draws focus to the cultural features and power dynamics of interactions and contexts that include peers and adults from diverse ethnic/racial and economic backgrounds (Jagers et al., 2018).

Seeking to align with these efforts that call for more just and equitable research and practice, the present article argues for the potential utility of *prototype analysis* in supporting the adoption of equity elaborations and the use of transformative SEL measurement strategies. Presenting an alternative approach to the classical view of defining concepts, prototype theory involves listing central features of a target construct (e.g., best examples, clearest cases, most typical exemplars) and then systematically examining their frequency and rank to discern which features, according to the intended population, are more salient or representative of the target construct (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Rosch, 1975; Rosch, 1977).

The advantages of prototype methods are threefold. First, transformative SEL calls for basic and applied research to include additional measurement indices capturing more diverse cultural assets (i.e., improved content validity; Jagers et al., 2018). This involves integrating insights from two research traditions in cross-cultural psychology: *emic* and *etic*. Emic, or culture-specific systems, use a "focal" approach to emphasize cultural differences and distinctiveness in behavior. Etic, or culture-general systems, use a "global" approach to examine the universality of psychological processes to identify

broad patterns of relationships between behavioral and cultural variables (Berry, 1989; Berry et al., 2002). The proposed prototype analysis combines a qualitative emic approach with a quantitative etic approach to expand and deepen our understanding of the definitions currently associated with the five CASEL competencies.

The second advantage of prototype methods is the opportunity to leverage the partnership-based methodology of participatory action research and consult directly with the target population(s). Engaging in this process may reveal how a concept is understood and displayed across various segments of the population (e.g., race/ethnicity, SES, urban, rural), ultimately allowing for more meaningful and valid group comparisons to be made. Obtaining stakeholders' perspectives also facilitates the process of linking theory and research to acceptable and effective practice, as well as promotes an inclusive and culture-sensitive approach that counters the use of a deficit or pathological lens (Bennett & Cohen, 2019; Ozer & Douglas, 2013).

Finally, using a systematic approach to investigate everyday conceptions of SEL competencies provides an opportunity to define and measure concepts in a way that reflects "lay usage" rather than "expert definitions" (e.g., Delle Fave et al., 2016). Similar to the collaborative nature of participatory research approaches, integrating layperson's perspectives represents a change in existing researcher–subject power relations and may lead to generating measurement items that are more culturally responsive and psychometrically sound. More specifically, given increasing acknowledgment that SEL competencies are multidimensional constructs, the definitions of which are negotiated between individuals and their cultural worlds, it is important to examine the patterns and strength of relations between the definitions put forth by academic experts and those generated by the intended populations of study.

To begin, the present article provides a brief review of recent strategies to ground SEL in a focus on equity, highlighting the implications such efforts may have on SEL assessment. This is followed by a discussion of the adequacy of current SEL measurement tools, including the limited exploration of content validity and conceptual equivalence when examining their generalizability. To narrow the scope of this article, illustrative examples of the aforementioned issues as they relate to Black students are referenced. The focus on this population is in part due to the longer line of research (comparatively) exploring their racial and cultural socialization, as well as the previously documented concerns regarding the adequacy of assessment in these studies (M. C. Lambert et al., 2002). Finally, an argument is made that an etic (culture-general) approach can be iterated upon with an emic (culture-specific) approach to broaden current conceptualization of SEL competencies (i.e., improve content validity), maximize item

relevance, and increase consistency of interpretation when applying a measure to multiple groups (i.e., improve conceptual equivalence).

Educational Equity Through Transformative SEL

Considerable research has suggested that school-based interventions targeting SEL competencies result in social and academic adjustment, as well as reduced levels of conduct problems and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2011; Weissberg et al., 2015). Moreover, the longer term impact of universal SEL interventions has been described in association with positive developmental trajectories, including links between SEL competencies assessed in childhood and future outcomes in health, education, and well-being (Jones et al., 2015).

Yet as evidence continues to mount in support of SEL efforts, questions have been raised as to whether the guiding frameworks, prominent programs, and associated assessments adequately reflect, cultivate, and leverage cultural assets of students of color and those from underresourced backgrounds (Jagers et al., 2018). These issues are being met with greater urgency as an increasing number of states adopt SEL standards and the demand to bring SEL programs to K-12 settings grows stronger (CASEL, 2018). As programs widen their reach, it is essential that the measurement tools employed to assess their efficacy adequately capture the targeted skills and competencies in ways that are sensitive to the increasingly diverse school systems within the United States. The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that by 2024, students of color will make up 56% of the public school population, but the teaching workforce will remain overwhelmingly White, as it has been for the past two decades (D'Amico et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). At this time, more than 2 million Black students attend schools where 90% of the student body is made up of racial-ethnic minority students and 80% of the principals are White (Cook, 2015). In light of this demographic reality, increased emphasis has been placed on the use of culturally responsive pedagogy in delivering SEL interventions (i.e., recognizing cultural differences as strengths upon which to build programs), as well as calls for teacher training to provide more explicit demonstrations of how to leverage culture as a vehicle for SEL (Bassey, 2016; Sleeter, 2017).

Beyond the discrepancies found in the racial makeup of schools, additional concern has been raised regarding the unique conditions of urban sectors that may influence the extent to which measurement tools are accurately comparing individuals of different ethnicities, those living in different locales, and those exposed to distinct social and/or political forces (Hoffman, 2009). As stated earlier, youth in low-income urban communities, compared

with youth from less disadvantaged communities, may encounter a range of situational stressors with the potential to compromise their functioning, while also lacking access to protective resources and supports for healthy development (Day et al., 2016; Frame et al., 1998). Among the environmental risk factors identified in previous studies are institutional racism, discrimination, neighborhood crime rates, residential mobility, exposure to violence, family discord, language barriers, and unemployment, all of which have been associated with higher rates of psychological distress, such as depression and anxiety (Dyce, 2015; Frame et al., 1998; Grant et al., 2004; Menacker et al., 1990). Each of these challenges reflect the additional pressure to recognize and address the systemic and interlocking forces at work in education, broadly, but also social–emotional initiatives, specifically (Simmons, 2019).

In response to the above-listed disparities, practitioners, researchers, and policy makers have taken on new priorities intent on examining biases and interrupting inequitable practices, policies, curricula, and research. The Aspen Institute Education and Society (2018), a leader in SEL reforms, released a brief that lists 10 recommendations to help guide schools and systems in the implementation of SEL programming through a racial equity lens, for example,

> stereotype threat can be mitigated in the classroom through teachers' use of affirmations that the student is seen as competent and valued and by a focus on tasks as the basis for ongoing improvement, rather than as judgments of ability. (p. 4)

Similarly, in a recent brief from Pennsylvania State University, five barriers contributing to inequitable access to a high-quality SEL education are identified—poverty, exclusionary discipline, lack of trauma-informed practices, implicit bias, and educator burnout. Each of these are described alongside promising initiatives that may allow for more fair and just access to SEL programming (e.g., restorative justice practices, mindfulness programming; D. N. Simmons et al., 2018).

Other resources focus on identifying factors that promote successful implementation of programmatic initiatives. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) developed a framework to call attention to the ways in which federal funding under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) can be leveraged in advancing the equity agenda, including identifying high-impact actions and guiding questions to guide leaders in their planning efforts (Aspen Education and Society Program & the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016). More recently, the Great Lakes Equity Center, an educational research center located in Indiana University's School of Education, created

a tool designed to support users' ability to develop indicators through a more reflective, equity-focused approach to SEL. Providing a reframe of the five CASEL competencies, the "Centering Equity in Social Emotional Learning Tool" (or "Equity Tool" for short) is a rubric that hones in on the educational access, participation, and outcomes for those who have been historically marginalized (Coomer & Skelton, 2019). Recognizing how SEL standards continue to center norms and experiences in the preferences of the White, middle-class, the Equity Tool examines the degree to which each CASEL competency implicates the role of the school in determining social norms, policy or power imbalances, and the promotion of student agency (Coomer & Skelton, 2019).

Perhaps most relevant to the current review, a recent brief published by CASEL introduces *equity-elaborated competencies* as part of the development of transformative SEL (Jagers et al., 2018). To more effectively address issues such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination, the definitions previously established in the CASEL framework are expanded to include knowledge, skills, and abilities that account for the cultural and historical context of SEL and equity. For example, competence in *self-awareness* is expanded from an understanding of one's emotions, personal and social identities, goals, and values, to also include recognition of one's own biases and identification of the links between one's personal and collective history. Such links can be developed based on cultural background (e.g., values, traditions) or specific experiences (e.g., racial discrimination) (CASEL District Resource Center, n.d.). In the case of urban youth, particularly Black youth, previous research has suggested that persistent exposure to negative representations of minoritized populations in media productions, government policies, and popular discourse may contribute to lowered self-esteem, underestimation of capacities, and socially induced fractures to one's identity (Cammarota, 2011; Steele, 1997). Thus, more intentional exploration of how race and ethnicity affect one's sense of self and beliefs is thought to be one promising approach to countering the development of negative self-perceptions and promoting a positive ethnic-racial identity, which, in turn, is favorably associated with psychological, academic, and social well-being (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014).

While each of the aforementioned efforts move us closer to culturally grounded programming, they do not necessarily ensure that practitioners and researchers are *measuring* SEL in ways that are culturally anchored and appropriate for the population(s) of interest. Despite the burgeoning number of measures becoming available to support SEL evaluation work (see Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016; Yates et al., 2008; and CASEL's online SEL

assessment selection tool at http://measuringsel.casel.org/assessment-guide/), the majority were developed for use in small-scale or specialized studies, with far fewer designed for large-scale use with diverse populations. Moreover, the psychometric rigor of these measures is often called into question given the limited number of validation studies conducted beyond theoretical and content-based frameworks for score interpretation (Rodriguez et al., 2019). In fact, of the 75 social and emotional measures reviewed by Halle and Darling-Churchill (2016), only six were deemed to have the "winning combination" of strong psychometric properties, usefulness with a diverse population (i.e., comprehensive coverage of the multifaceted set of skills and competencies associated with targeted competencies), and ease of administration.

To summarize, the prioritization of SEL through a racial equity lens is only one piece of the puzzle. Two additional steps that are critical to the successful pursuit of the described equity-oriented endeavors are: 1) performing *content validation* procedures, or ensuring existing measurement indices are representative of targeted SEL competencies and 2) examining *conceptual equivalence*, or determining the degree to which SEL competencies have the same meaning across different groups (Byrne & Van de Vijver, 2010; Hall et al., 2016).

The Need to Measure Up: Examining the Adequacy of Existing SEL Measures

In a next-generation research agenda for social and academic development, S. Jones and colleagues (2019) stress the need for increased precision and coverage in construct definitions and measurement, explicitly calling for greater consideration of socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts influencing SEL competencies. This includes addressing the often ignored reality that the majority of SEL competencies have been conceptualized around a dominant cultural frame and subjected to a universalist bias. Said differently, SEL competencies are often conceptualized, implemented, and assessed in ways that place great emphasis on the White middle-class culture, with inadequate exploration of the cultural assets and inherent strengths of non-White populations (Aspen Institute Education and Society, 2018; Sleeter, 2017). Coupled with the limited attention directed toward equity-oriented measurement practices, two potential risks emerge: 1) the definitions employed may not be relevant or comprehensive to the population under study and 2) the meaning of the target construct may vary across groups. Additional concern arises when considering the potential problematic comparisons or inappropriate inferences

drawn from cross-cultural research that assumes measurement equivalence. This is further exacerbated when standardization samples are used as norms against which the nature and prevalence of positive assets or behavior problems in other populations are gauged, or when race is suggested as an important predictor of social–emotional competence (e.g., Graves & Howes, 2011; Rice et al., 1997). The following sections take a closer look at each of these challenges to SEL assessment, laying the foundation for a later argument to integrate universalist and culture-specific approaches to measurement.

Examining Content Validity

Although often overlooked, a key aspect of the construct validation process is establishing the content validity of instruments used to measure SEL competencies (Messick, 1975; Vogt et al., 2004). In some cases, concerns of content validity arise when a construct that was drawn from the cultural context of a majority group lacks full coverage of the cultural indicators salient to minoritized group members. For example, previous studies reveal that the norms, knowledge, values, forms of expression, and "ways of being" central to most Black students may be incongruent with mainstream or dominant practices associated with social and emotional success (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Kochman, 1983; Rivera & Adkinson, 1997; Tyler et al., 2006). In particular, Kochman (1983) describes the failure to recognize the scope of expressiveness in Black culture or the greater freedom it offers to assert and express oneself as compared with the White culture. With regard to the current conceptualization of *self-management*, he notes that the de-emphasis placed on emotional expressiveness in favor of greater emotional restraint actually falls in direct contrast to the "animation and vitality of black expressive behavior" (Kochman, 1983, p. 108). Similarly, African American's language patterns often allow simultaneous talk with a high level of facial and gestural communication. Yet measurement of communication skills often emphasizes turn-taking in speaker–listener interactions, a reflection of what is expected and valued from the mainstream culture perspective (Seymour et al., 1995).

Stearns (2019) refers to these potential omissions in conceptualization as "the erasure of race in SEL," noting that efforts to regulate students' emotions according to normative standards imply that a "dysregulated" student faces some sort of deficit. Further, this may fail to take into account the interpersonal aspect of emotional regulation and potentially overvalue individual skill development (p. 138). Jagers (2018) echoes this argument, describing the deeper structural-level changes that are needed when it comes to promoting *social awareness*, another well-studied SEL competency. Recognizing

the more communal nature of African American cultures (as well as other traditionally collectivist cultures—for example, Latino American and Native American), he calls for greater consideration of cooperative learning, restorative justice, and project-based learning approaches to help balance the greater value currently placed on independence by the dominant majority. Along similar lines, Tyler and colleagues (2006) drew attention to how cultural value variation can manifest in modes of behavior that do not conform to the mainstream norms promoted in school settings. In a study examining the presence of specific cultural values within preferred classroom and home activities, Black students reported having significantly stronger preferences for communal and vervistic activities at home and at school than for individualistic and competitive activities (Tyler et al., 2006). In addition, students reporting a preference for communal and vervistic-based behaviors were more likely to get in trouble when engaging in such behaviors as compared to the more mainstream cultural behaviors of individualistic and competition-based behaviors (Bernstein & Lysniak, 2017; Tyler et al., 2006).

Each of these examples reflect an *imposed etic* approach in which definitions and measurement of target SEL constructs that were validated and standardized in the dominant White culture are directly applied across diverse groups. In each case, greater consideration is needed for the cultural assets of additional cultural orientations and/or further examinination is required to determine the local relevance of the construct (Goldenberg, 2014; Leong et al., 2010).

Examining Conceptual Equivalence

Beyond the potential omission of key indicators posing a threat to content validity, there is also the questionable assumption of conceptual equivalence. Conceptual equivalence refers to the degree to which a construct, in this case, SEL competencies, has the same meaning across groups (Knight & Hill, 1998). SEL is a complex domain of human development experienced differently by people in different cultural, social, and political contexts. Therefore the underlying assumption remains that the competencies are socially contingent, culturally anchored, and do not only change over an individual's life course, but across sociocultural contexts as well. Yet studies often overlook the prerequisite step of examining conceptual equivalence across groups (Green & Glasgow, 2006).

One notable exception is the recent evaluation of *SELweb*, a web-based, self-administered battery of assessments of social–emotional comprehension. McKown's (2019b) analyses begin with an investigation of psychometric properties and measurement invariance to determine whether the measures are culturally or contextually biased. This involved examining the assumption

that the constructs associated with emotion recognition, social perspective-taking, and social problem-solving hold similar meanings across ethnically and socioeconomically diverse students in urban and suburban schools. As compared with tests of equivalence across time and sex, results indicated less support that scores of children from different ethnic groups have the same meaning. Thus, until future work is conducted to identify and address the sources of ethnic noninvariance, the author stresses that interpretation of mean score differences between groups on SELweb should be made with caution.

In summary, as researchers seek to develop SEL assessment tools that improve our understanding of how SEL competencies are expressed within and between groups, it is important to generate evidence of both content validity and conceptual equivalence. Content validity requires a systematic approach to determine whether the full range of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that are salient to diverse groups are represented by current definitions and assessment. Conceptual equivalence requires closer examination of measurement practices to ensure they adequately attend to within- and between-group differences. As attempts are made to take on both of these challenges, the etic–emic paradigm of cross-cultural research offers a helpful framework to distinguish between the universal and cultural-specific aspects of SEL competencies (Berry, 1999; Helfrich, 1999). The following section proposes a shift from an "imposed etic" to a "derived etic" approach using prototype analysis.

Combining Etic and Emic Approaches: From Imposed Etic to Derived Etic

Cultural influence has often relied on comparative findings that use an "imposed etic" approach to highlight group differences along broad dimensions (Allen & Boykin, 1992). Yet, to advance understanding in cross-cultural research, an emic orientation is also needed to identify behaviors that are meaningful and relevant within specific sociocultural contexts. Etic and emic approaches, however, are not incompatible. The universal etic approach identifies culture-general concepts and underlying mechanisms, whereas the focal emic approach locates culture-specific manifestations to enrich, diversify, and complement the broader concepts. The question remains, however, how can researchers develop both culture-general and culture-specific sets of items so that measures can be more meaningfully used?

Cross-Cultural Research: Imposed Etic, Emic, and Derived Etic

In an effort to leverage both etic and emic approaches, Berry (1989) proposes a *derived etic model*, which argues against choosing between the two, and

instead describes how to achieve both, over time, within the same research program. This begins with emic research using predominantly qualitative data collection methods to establish and validate research instruments, and then systematically progresses to more traditional quantitative research paradigms with larger samples to examine generalizability across populations. Concepts that ultimately emerge across cultures are cautiously considered universal (often labeled *derived etic*), while concepts that vary across cultures are confirmed as culture-specific (often labeled *true emic*). This moves away from the imposed etic strategy, which relies on the assumption that the research concept (and associated measurement) maintains the same meaning to new participants as they did to the initially examined group (Niblo & Jackson, 2004).

Prototype analysis. While the classical view of defining a construct holds to the assumption that the features or properties are expected to be shared across all groups or instances, prototype analysis offers the flexibility needed to distinguish between constructs that are universally meaningful and those that are narrower in their application. In the first step, a *free-listing* procedure is used to define the target construct in emic terms (i.e., using the language, concepts, and categories of the group under study). Free listing has a long history in cognitive anthropology as a key method used to establish the coherence or boundaries of particular cultural domains of knowledge or practice (Schrauf & Sanchez, 2008). From the data obtained, researchers are able to identify items that belong to the target construct, discern which items are more salient or representative of the construct for different groups, and determine the extent of overlap in conceptualization of the construct within and between groups (Borgatti, 1998; Weller & Romney, 1988). For example, Barg and colleagues (2006) investigated the conceptualization of *depressive symptoms* with samples of White and African American participants. When asked to list words that describe "a person who is depressed" and "you when you are depressed, down in the dumps, or blue" (Barg et al., 2006, p. S331), both Whites and African Americans mapped to a common understanding of depression, with each group viewing "loneliness" as a key component of the experience. Using the same approach to look at the organizational structures of *love* and *commitment*, Fehr (1988, 1999) demonstrated that specific features of love (trust and caring) were more central than others (dependency and fear), and reported a largely overlapping representation of love and commitment in the average person's understanding of the terms.

Once members of the target population have used free listing to identify the contents of a target construct, frequency of item occurrence across individuals and item rank are then used as indicators of *salience*. Results from

these analyses can be used to guide further exploration of the universal etic and variable emic features of a construct. Both quantitative (e.g., confirmatory factor analyses) and qualitative methodologies (e.g., focus groups) can then be employed to complete the requisite psychometric tests of invariance to establish conceptual equivalence. With these central processes in mind, prototype analysis has the potential to advance the transformative SEL agenda in two key ways: (a) using the free-listing procedure to improve SEL domain representation and relevance (i.e., establishing content validity) and (b) exploring the potential variation of lay, or "every day," conceptions of SEL competencies within and between underrepresented populations (i.e., establishing conceptual equivalence).

Content Validation of SEL Assessment: Representativeness and Relevance

Free listing: Defining a construct. The free-listing procedure of prototype analysis is a simple technique (usually requires no more than 5 min) in which participants are asked to "list as many ideas (or items) on topic 'X'" as they can (for additional methodological details on free listing, see Weller & Romney, 1988). For example, in a four-study investigation aiming to unpack *good character*, participants were asked, "What comes to mind when you think of good character? List all the features of someone with good character." Free lists were then compared to generate prototypes. By examining frequency and order of responses, categorizing common items, and using culturally specific vernacular language, emic features that belong to a construct can be elicited in a systematic manner. In the example above on defining character, mean prototypicality ratings revealed that being honest, trustworthy, and genuine were considered more prototypic of good character than being nonviolent, selfless, or rational (Lapsley & Lasky, 2001). The authors also note that when the 20 most frequently nominated traits considered to be central to the "good character" prototype were compared with the most frequently nominated attributes of a "moral person" (identified in a previous study), only "honest" appeared on both lists (Walker & Pitts, 1998).

In the case of SEL competencies, prototype strategies may help in shifting descriptions of student behaviors and skills from a deficit-oriented framing to more comprehensive, strength-based definitions that reflect the multiple orientations, skills, and abilities of diverse student backgrounds. For instance, when students navigate between various context settings that do not align in cultural expectations (e.g., neighborhood, home, school, and peers), they are often faced with a demand to alternate between distinct cultural behavioral repertoires. It is therefore possible that during the free-listing procedure of

prototype analysis, elements of *bicultural competence*, or the ability to function across two cultures while maintaining one's sense of self and cultural identity, may surface in descriptions provided by minoritized youth (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Rashid, 1984). Bicultural competence may involve *cultural frame switching*, a complex awareness and understanding of multiple cultures, identities, relationships, and social expectations, and the ability to purposefully alternate one's behavior depending on situational cues (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013), and/or *code-switching*, or altering language and tone depending on the context to adapt to the situational demands (Huynh et al., 2011; Morton, 2014). Employing such strategies requires awareness of cultural beliefs and values, sensitivity to the affective processes of different cultures, effectiveness in communicating ideas and feelings to members of a given culture, and a wide-ranging repertoire of culturally appropriate behaviors (e.g., displays of respect, interaction postures, orientation to knowledge, or worldviews). Accordingly, it is plausible that prototype methods may uncover new skills and competencies that are not currently assessed in measures of SEL competencies, and yet are key to maintaining active social relations or negotiating the institutional structures of distinct contexts and cultures. Furthermore, existing evidence suggests that displays of bicultural competence may require higher levels of general cognitive functioning and social and emotional health as compared with individuals who are monocultural, assimilated, or acculturated (Hong et al., 2000; Oyserman et al., 2003; Rogler et al., 1991).

Similarly, building on Kochman's (1983) discussion of emotional self-management, prototype analysis may also reveal behavioral displays rooted in Afrocultural ethos that have previously been considered at odds or deemed inappropriate within Eurocentric education, including elevated voice levels, reliance on nonverbal gestures, and displays of emotion (Boykin, 1994; Kochman, 1983). To the unfamiliar teacher, the inherently emotive style of expression characteristic of African American youths' communicative repertoire may come across as combative or argumentative, leading to disproportionate discipline practices (Basile et al., 2019; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Lovelace & Wheeler, 2006; Monroe, 2006). Greater recognition for these potentially overlooked self-management skills may not only expand current understanding of SEL competencies to ensure they are sensitive to the ways that culture, power, and privilege affect students, but also may be particularly important for the training of a predominantly White and female teaching force in need of building strong relationships and trust with diverse student populations (Goldenberg, 2014; Sleeter, 2017).

Although the utility of prototypical organization has not yet been demonstrated with SEL competencies, a number of studies have already applied this

approach to the conceptualization and measurement of complex psychological constructs, including forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2004), romantic jealousy (Sharpsteen, 1993), gender (Fox, 2011), intimacy in same-sex interactions (Fehr, 2004), and even a few constructs that have been previously been associated with SEL competencies, such as gratitude (Lambert et al., 2009), relationship quality (Hassebrauck, 1997), character education (McGrath, 2018), and respect (Frei & Shaver, 2002). The majority of these studies were conducted with small, predominantly White samples; however, in each case, the authors argue how such concepts may be better characterized as prototypes, as opposed to the more commonly practiced "all or none" approach that identifies requisite features and fails to discern which are deemed by the intended population(s) as more salient or representative of the construct.

Free listing: Rank-ordering items. Once a free list of terms has been generated, a number of measures can be derived from the data to identify relevant indices or distinguish between cultural domains, including *list length*, or total number of items listed (a common indicator of the target population's knowledge of the specific domain); *clustering*, or inter-item distance in list order (a common indicator of the target population's principles of categorization); and *order of mention* (along with frequency, this is often considered a common indicator of relative psychological or cultural salience) (Robbins & Nolan, 1997). In particular, frequency and order of mention are often combined into a single index, gross mean percentile rank, or *salience index*, in which items mentioned early and often would have a relatively high mean percentile rank (Smith, 1993).

Other approaches to testing and characterizing differences within and between free lists include *consensus analysis*, to address domain coherence and group consensus (e.g., factor analytic methods), and *residuals and frequencies analysis*, to address subvariation (e.g., comparing mean scores or inter-informant agreement). Each of these offer initial insight into the concepts or categories that should be considered for additional study and/or to identify patterns among distinct cultural groups. More specifically, free-listed features from different cultural groups may be compared quantitatively by assessing correlations between the frequencies of free listing associated with given features across cultures or by using content analysis to sort features within each culture's prototype into theoretically distinct categories. The resulting profiles allow for comparisons of cultures using the chi-square statistic (Smith et al., 2007).

K. D. Smith and colleagues (2007) demonstrated the utility of this approach in a cross-cultural research study that developed prototypes of "what defines a good person." Free-listing responses of participants were

collected from seven distinct cultures representing both individualistic and collectivist values, ranging from large urban settings to more rural areas, and including multiple religious traditions. In this exploratory study examining the representation of diverse views and seeking to describe commonalities and differences, several interesting findings emerged. First, although some frequently free-listed features reflected negations of faults (e.g., "not prejudiced"), the majority were distinctly positive, which reinforces positive psychology's emphasis on the concept of flourishing encompassing more than the mere absence of pathology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In addition, although the features generated demonstrated some overlap across cultures, the rankings of the features *within* cultures also showed considerable variation. Results from content analyses revealed interpersonal benevolence (i.e., caring, humanity) emerged as the most accessible descriptor of a "good person" while features associated with competence-based categories (e.g., achievement, confidence, drive) showed a wider range of accessibility to different cultures. The prototypes also suggested both underrepresentations and overspecializations of several construct facets in existing expert classifications. For instance, *respectful*, which is not included in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) theory-based studies of virtue-affirming character strengths ("values in action"), was the quality most frequently mentioned by participants in two of the seven samples and appeared in the top 30 for six of the seven cultures. On the contrary, qualities such as *authenticity* and *zest* did not appear in the prototypes; however, in each case, more general, closely associated qualities (e.g., *integrity, enjoys life*) did.

To summarize, adequate cross-cultural measurement requires knowledge about the target domain (i.e., What are the contents and boundaries of the construct being studied?) and the relationships among items in the domain (i.e., How are the construct's contents structured, particularly with regard to salience?). The free-listing procedure of prototype analysis has the distinct advantage of providing *emic* data from the point of view of the "cultural insider," from which derived etic can later be drawn. This may facilitate the identification of existing content-invalid assessment tools, or establish the validity of new ones, by revealing which features of the target concepts may be overrepresented, omitted, or underrepresented in the measurement of target SEL constructs.

Alignment of Expert and Lay Conceptualizations: Giving Voice to the Researched

One additional advantage of prototype analysis is the opportunity to engage in participatory methods that intend to validate the knowledge of the target

population and allow for their direct engagement with issues under study (L. F. Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Such methods serve as a welcome departure from the traditional hierarchical nature of researcher–subject relationships and are intentional in amplifying the "missing voice" of historically marginalized groups in the research process. Toward this end, Bennett and Cohen (2019) argued for a shift in educational research of urban public schools away from the current focus on creating replicable and generalizable knowledge and toward the goal of informing local educational praxis. By engaging in a more collaborative approach to stakeholder involvement, researchers are not only more equipped to take into account the fact that in a culturally diverse society, views of what SEL competence is, how it is enacted, and how it should be measured may differ across groups but are also able to offer opportunities for active involvement with those who are conventionally the focus of study.

Similarly, the growing body of knowledge on social and emotional development is largely shaped through an adult lens that heavily relies on deductive conceptual approaches. Given the major tenets of the positive youth development framework rest on a desire to empower all youth, it is important to develop more inclusive practices that more accurately capture their unique perspectives (Benson et al., 2006; Ozer, 2016). Thus, in keeping with the goal of using inductive reasoning to generate knowledge, prototype analysis stems from "the understanding that people . . . hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, [and] frame the interpretations [of research]" (Torre & Fine, 2006, p. 458). Youth subjects are no longer viewed as "passive participants," but rather partners in the research process, and therefore can be consulted to inform the conceptualization of SEL competencies and the subsequent item development. As a result, previously unexplored questions can be answered, such as how are the targeted SEL constructs operationalized by the intended population? Or to what extent are expert and layperson definitions of SEL competencies aligned?

Discussion

Social and emotional development encompasses a complex and multifaceted set of competencies that do not lend themselves to consistent measurement within the empirical literature (Hall et al., 2016). Well-substantiated concern has arisen regarding assumptions of content and cultural validity in measures of SEL competencies, particularly in the face of a teacher population that is primarily White and monocultural, a student population that is increasingly diverse, and educational outcomes that reflect persistent inequalities across racial and ethnic differences (Frey, 2018). In addition, while SEL is widely studied, limited empirical attention is directed toward examining the use of

SEL programs in specific community types, including urban settings, or moving beyond efficacy to examine the effectiveness and sustainability of such programs in varying settings. Urban schools in particular serve a disproportionately high number of public school students from racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse families and low-income communities, and prior studies have documented the limited effectiveness of interventions targeting Black youth within the urban population, as compared with those aimed at the broader population (Farahmand and colleagues, 2011). Recognizing that SEL competencies and behaviors are inherently embedded within cultural systems that define what is normative, acceptable, positive, or not, it is important to examine the adequacy of measures in representing the same construct within and across cultural groups. To date, there has been a heavy reliance on tests of differential item and test functioning to address the question of cultural appropriateness. Yet, without examining the meaningfulness of measures (i.e., establishing content validity) or ensuring they meet rigorous standards of invariance (i.e., establishing conceptual equivalence), there is a risk excluding culturally salient indices and undermining universal relevance (McKown, 2019a).

According to Jagers and colleagues (2019), transformative SEL represents an as-yet underutilized approach, in part due to the anticipated challenges in measurement. Aligning with the goals of transformative SEL, the present article proposes that a culture-specific approach can be iterated upon with a culture-general approach by leveraging prototype analysis to advance these efforts. By establishing emic validity prior to investigating cross-cultural generalizability, prototype methods help guard against the assumption that systematic associations among values, experience, and orientations hold across cultures, thus reducing the risk of erroneously reporting the occurrence (or nonoccurrence) of SEL behaviors and/or falsely detecting (or failing to detect) the significance of program effects. Moreover, the embedded free-listing procedure not only provides an opportunity to give voice to previously unrepresented populations of study, a critical endeavor as the U.S. racial composition continues to diversify, but also deviates from the typical emphasis placed on outsider perspectives (e.g., the investigator's) over the perspectives of those being studied. This is particularly important for urban Black youth "whose culture and ethnic/racial group membership has been disparaged historically or is currently diminished within mainstream cultural institutions, such as schools" (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 8). Furthermore, there is a much-needed shift toward recognizing and capitalizing on the strengths and assets of this population as they have been largely overshadowed by a deficit lens (Aspen Institute Education and Society, 2018).

In line with these objectives, prototype analysis can explore the extent to which SEL competencies include culturally sensitive content and subsequently determine whether the generated features are overlooked or omitted in current assessments. For instance, as noted earlier, indicators of ethnic-racial identity development, or beliefs about the importance of ethnicity or race to the sense of self, may surface in self-awareness prototype definitions. Or, results of the free-listing process for self-management and relationship skills may highlight displays of bicultural competence and/or coping strategies that have been developed in response to acculturative stress and/or ethnic/racial and class-based discrimination. Such findings could potentially guide the content development and delivery of SEL programs. In a recent systematic review of SEL interventions conducted on 38 urban schools within the United States., none of the studies that were included addressed inequalities (i.e., racism, classism, sexism, religion, and immigration status) as part of their SEL intervention curriculum (McCallops et al., 2019). This is despite growing evidence that discrimination based on inequalities often leads to stress and trauma, thus establishing a need for interventions to address such issues (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Considering discrimination experiences can look very different across school settings, prototype analyses may provide key insight into the development of inequality-based SEL interventions that aim to address, and hopefully attenuate, the negative effects of internalized, interpersonal, and institutional oppression that has been previously documented in urban school districts (Allen et al., 2013).

Gaining more comprehensive and nuanced definitions of SEL competencies may also promote greater cultural understanding, increase awareness of power dynamics, and support students and adults in building relationships and/or interacting with others across diverse backgrounds. For White teachers in urban schools primarily serving students of color, differences in the understanding of norms, social roles, and related rules about emotional displays can lead to the mislabeling of behaviors, escalation of student–teacher disagreements, and disproportionality of school discipline (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Monroe, 2006). Using prototype analysis to address gaps in the operationalization of SEL competencies can potentially inform teacher training. This may include equipping educators with culturally appropriate strategies for building strong relationships with students and families, incorporating student perspectives and experiences into SEL lessons, and engaging in reflective teaching within the context of SEL instruction.

In summary, as the field continues to call for greater consideration of SEL within broader socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts, prototype strategies may provide one way to advance the goal of gaining a more nuanced and culturally sensitive understanding of key competencies. Well aligned with

transformative SEL efforts, prototype analysis avoids presupposing conditions and offers an expanded vantage point to assess the adequacy of current and future measures. By using a more inductive and integrated emic–etic approach, researchers and practitioners may be able to draw stronger inferences from distinct study populations and ensure adequate coverage and representation of target SEL competencies.

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