

ABSTRACT

Self-regulation has been identified as important for academic achievement, positive mental health, and social success (Steinberg, 2014, Mischel, 2014). This inquiry begins with self-regulation defined traditionally as “modulation of thoughts, emotions and behaviors working in conjunction, with deliberate or automated use of specific mechanisms and skills” (Karoly, 1993, pg. 25) and extends beyond that and similar definitions to a definition that adds “as enacted in relationships and situations with culturally-relevant media.” The need for such an expansion urgently accounts for the fact that young people are living in high-risk settings, where trauma, violence and economic difficulty are implicated not only in psycho-physical development but also in environments that involve threats and/or supports for individuals’ self-regulation. Thus, research findings that many adolescents living in high-risk settings drop out of high school, exhibit poor psychological functioning, and lack of positive relationships (Steinberg, 2014; Tough, 2012), must be examined as interdependent environmental and individual processes. Traditional standardized measures such as surveys, experts’ observations, and assessments with questionnaires and lab-based tasks can only point to an ability or inability to self-regulate as though it were a stable trait rather than a relational process. Such assessments of self-regulation limit the knowledge we gain from these research findings and thus the types of ongoing research and clinical practice we can develop. To address the lack of complexity in prior theory and method on adolescent self-regulation, the present study brings context – relational role, setting, and expressive medium into an understanding of self-regulation. In contrast to commonly used assessments that evaluate self-regulation skill as a whole, against normative standards, this study employs adolescents’ perspectives from diverse positions around

issues of conflict for practical as well as theoretical implications. Previous research using a narrative measure found that adolescents living in high-risk settings self-regulated differently in different contexts and when taking on different author roles in narrating a conflict situation (Conover and Daiute, 2017). Expanding on that pilot study, the project presented in this dissertation aims to address the following research questions, (1) How does adolescent self-regulation in narratives of social conflicts vary by relational context (family, school, peer) and adolescents' role as a participant in the conflict? (2) How do context/role sensitive measures of self-regulation (process assessments) compare to the Adolescent Self-Regulatory Inventory, a trait-based measure, in terms of participant performances?

The current study uses a mixed-methods qualitative exploratory research design. Narrative activities and a standardized measure of adolescent self-regulation were used to elicit self-regulation strategy knowledge and self-regulation strategy use across a range of situations and relationships like those in adolescents' lives. Participants were presented with narratives simulating real-life conflict situations and asked to create narratives in response to the situations. Through this, participants worked through and made meaning of the presented situations, demonstrating differences in responses across context and author role. Finally, participant voice was elicited through structured interviews that promote reflection and clarification of how and why participants responded to conflict situations similarly or differently in the various contexts and author roles. Similar analyses of the participants narratives in a series of text message scenarios and their reflections on questions about differences across the narrative and standard measures provide a means of comparing contributions of the different types of narrative contexts, thereby offering insights toward expanding the concept of adolescent self-regulation.

Narrative Plot analysis was used to identify the plot elements and psychological states mentioned in the narratives and analyze the differences in the use of these plot elements and psychological states by context and author role. Two dimensions of relational processing of the conflict situations were identified: processing cause and effect and cognitive and affective symbolizations. Cause and effect were defined by the Complicating Actions and Resolution Strategies used in the narratives while cognitive and affective symbolizations were defined by the uses of cognitive and affective terms. Self-regulation strategies were identified within the narratives and categorized into four types of self-regulation strategies. ANOVAs with post hoc comparisons were used to support the findings of the narrative analysis.

Findings of the current study indicate that participants enacted conflict situations differently depending on the relational roles within which they were narrating. The escalation and resolution of a conflict occurred differently across authors roles and contexts as was the use of cognitive and affective symbolization. Different types of self-regulation strategies in the varied author roles and contexts were used in narrating the conflict situations. For example, conflict escalation, as indicated by mentions of complicating actions, occurred most frequently in the As Self: Before Texting narratives while conflict resolution, as indicated by mentions of resolution strategies, was most frequently used in the As Recipient of Advice from Mentor and As Youth Advisor to Younger Relative roles. Conflict escalation was most emphasized in Peer context narratives, but conflict resolution occurred more frequently in the Family context narratives. Types of self-regulation strategies used varied by context with participants including more affective strategies in the Peer narratives as compared to the Family context, where participants included more active strategies.

Although the current literature suggests adolescents living in high-risk settings have poor self-regulation ability, the ASRI scores of participants in the current study were normally distributed, providing evidence to the contrary. There was no correlation found between ASRI scores and number of resolution and self-regulation strategy mentions, emphasizing the limitations of a standardized assessment. The lack of correlation between ASRI scores and mentions of resolution and self-regulation strategies indicates the need for more context sensitive measures, such as the relational narratives used in this study, which can provide greater detail about an adolescent's knowledge and use of self-regulation strategies. Supporting these findings were common participant narratives found in the interviews in which participants cited interpersonal relationships and their own ability to use self-regulation strategies as reasons for why they did or did not use various strategies. Overall, results indicate that the context/role sensitive measures used in this study offer a complex understanding of adolescent self-regulation as a social-relational process characterized by context-sensitivity diversity within individual participants, rather than as a stable skill. While the Adolescent Self-Regulatory Inventory offers one numerical score of self-regulation skill, the context/role sensitive measures used in this study provide evidence for variation in adolescent self-regulation, defining self-regulation as a complex relational skill.