



How Does Prosocial Identity Protect Juveniles from Reoffending? Testing Core Components of a Conceptual Model for Identity-based Intervention

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Definition of Key Terms

Antisocial Behavior: Behavior that breaks legal or social norms and thus inflicts harm or loss on others and/or society. For adolescents, it typically manifests as delinquency, most of which would be a criminal offense if committed by an adult, and behaviors such as bullying and lying that are not sanctioned by the juvenile justice system.

Criminal/Delinquent Behavior: Behavior that constitutes legal violation and is sanctioned by the criminal/juvenile justice system. In the study, justice-involved youth's reoffending is criminal/delinquent behavior.

Desistance: The process by which individual risk for delinquent/criminal behavior declines.

Prosocial: A willingness to benefit others (i.e., other-oriented prosocial, typically used in the developmental and psychological literature and reflected in behavior such as helping, volunteering, and contributing) and/or to follow social and legal norms (i.e., conventional, typically used in the criminological literature and reflected in law-abiding behavior and commitment to employment, educational goals, and family roles).

Prosocial Identity Content: A youth's understanding of the meaning of prosocial (can be other-oriented prosocial and/or conventional) and the type of prosocial person they hope to be.

Prosocial Identity Prominence: A youth's subjective feeling of the significance or centrality of prosocial identity.

Prosocial Identity Validation: The extent of confidence a youth has to achieve a possible prosocial identity.

Background and Objectives

Young people who are involved in the juvenile justice system have disproportionately experienced poverty,¹ maltreatment,²⁻³ and other adverse experiences that can interfere with a successful transition to adulthood.³⁻⁵ Traditional behavioral interventions have focused on addressing risk factors for reoffending. In contrast, newer interventions emphasize building strengths and prosocial attributes to achieve desistance from offending and promote positive development.⁶ Building from the latter perspective, this project is designed to inform innovative behavioral intervention approaches that target prosocial identity—that is, approaches that seek to increase the extent to which young people view themselves as prosocial. Changing the way a young person thinks and feels about themselves could create a positive inflection point in their developmental pathway—leading to more prosocial patterns of behavior and a more successful transition to adult roles, relationships, and responsibilities.

Given the promise of an identity-based approach for creating lasting improvement in youths' behavior and life chances, we developed a conceptual model that focuses on three aspects of prosocial identity that could be targeted for change through intervention: identity *content*, *prominence*, and *validation* (see *Definition of Key Terms* section above). According to the model, the presence of prosocial identity (defined by the particular content that reflects the type of prosocial person one hopes to be) will protect youth against antisocial behavior—but will have stronger protection for those with a high degree of prosocial identity prominence and validation and those with strong environmental support from family, peers, and school. Namely, prosocial identity prominence, validation, and environmental support will interact with prosocial identity in a way that a higher level of these constructs will strengthen the protection of prosocial identity against antisocial behavior. This project is designed to begin testing the model by evaluating whether the three aspects of prosocial identity work as hypothesized, among a sample of justice-involved youth. This study explores the definition and mechanisms of prosocial identity to understand how it can inform the design of a future identity-based intervention.

Relevant Behavioral Concepts

The identity-based approach leverages developmental science by focusing on identity development among young people. It also leverages behavioral science by focusing on how identity motivates behavior and how key aspects of identity can be shaped through intervention. The approach weaves developmental and clinical science together through three main concepts:

- According to **identity-based motivation theories**, identity provides motivation, direction, and regulation for behavior.⁷⁻¹⁰ People (including youth) behave in accordance with their salient identity, and changes in identity predict changes in behavior.
- **Wise interventions** affect people's subjective meaning-making about themselves, others, and social situations to change behavior.¹¹⁻¹² Wise interventions target a precise psychological construct that is directly relevant to the behavior of interest. Identity (as one's inference about the self) is a common target for wise interventions.¹¹
- According to the **adaptive learning model of adolescent development**, adolescence is a period of rapid growth, learning, and adaptation, rather than a period of "storm and stress". During adolescence, young people's degree of cognitive control is flexible and sensitive to social and affective influences. Although adolescence is a period of vulnerability to risk-taking, it is also a period of opportunity for intervention, given sensitivity to social and emotional learning.¹³⁻¹⁴

Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. How should prosocial identity be defined, for this conceptual model and future intervention approaches? Specifically, compared to identity **content** that is conventional (i.e., emphasizes law-abiding and conventional commitment), does identity **content** that is other-oriented (i.e., emphasizes benefiting others) add value in protecting justice-involved youth against reoffending?
Hypothesis: Other-oriented identity will add no significant incremental utility to conventional identity in protecting justice-involved youth from reoffending.
 2. Does the protective effect of prosocial identity depend on youths' sense of **prominence** of prosocial identity?*
- Hypothesis:** Prosocial identity will interact with identity prominence to inversely predict reoffending. Specifically, prosocial identity will protect against reoffending, but will have stronger protective effects among youth with a high degree of internalized prosocial identity.

* For research question 2, 3, and 4, prosocial identity is defined by the results of research question 1. Namely, it could be solely conventional identity [if there are no incremental effects] or could also include other-oriented identity [if it adds incremental utility].

3. Does the protective effect of prosocial identity depend on youths' sense of self efficacy (as a proxy for prosocial identity **validation**)?

Hypothesis: Prosocial identity will protect against reoffending but will have particularly strong effects among youth with a high degree of general self-efficacy.

4. Does the protective effect of prosocial identity depend on youths' degree of social support and school connectedness?

Hypothesis: The protective effect of prosocial identity will be particularly strong among youth with greater social support and school connectedness, compared to those with fewer environmental supports.

Sample

The sample includes at least 488 youth (ages 12 to 20) who were newly referred to community supervision in Pennsylvania from April 2021 to May 2022. Independent variable measures will be drawn from a Protective Factor Survey consisting of nine validated scales and a Risk-Need Assessment administered to youth at baseline (time of referral). For example, prosocial identity content will be assessed by the Moral Ideal Self Scale¹⁵ embedded in the baseline survey that measures how 20 moral traits describe the type of person a youth wants to be, and prosocial identity prominence will be captured by the Moral Internalization Scale¹⁶⁻¹⁷ that assesses the extent to which being someone with a set of moral traits is central to one's personal identity. The dependent variable is measured with official re-arrest records over the 12-month period following referral.

Methods

Multiple logistic regression and causal modeling will be applied. For research question one, likelihood ratio test on two nested multiple logistic regression models with other-oriented prosocial and conventional identity being added stepwise will be conducted to examine whether adding one variable improves model fit over another. For the additional research questions, logistic regression with interaction terms and marginal structural model (MSM) with inverse probability of treatment weighted (IPTW)¹⁸ and Targeted Maximum Likelihood Estimation (TMLE)¹⁹ estimator will be used, respectively. For example, for research question two where prosocial identity content will be coded as dichotomously (low/high) and prosocial identity prominence will be coded categorically (low/moderate/high), multiple logistic regression analysis with interaction will be conducted first. Then, an MSM with IPTW or TMLE estimator can be used to estimate how the expected probabilities of reoffending vary as a function of youth's level of prosocial identity content and prominence.

Practice and Policy Implications

To the best of our knowledge, this project is the first to use multi-dimensional measures of prosocial identity to examine its relations with youth's reoffending. Findings from the study will shed light on mechanisms of behavioral change and inform the design of a potential identity-based intervention for justice-involved youth. For example, if results indicate that prominence strengthens the protective effect of prosocial identity against reoffending, interventions could seek to increase prominence by directly or indirectly labeling youth as prosocial (e.g., framing one as a "contributor", "helper", or "achiever", depending on the context), which has shown to be effective in changing behavior.²⁰⁻²¹ Furthermore, social services and policies may be guided to attend more to youth's internal processes, including shifting identity, as a vehicle for improving developmental trajectories. The understanding that such shifts matter and are possible will provide a new avenue to promote positive youth development.

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