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**A Study of Psychological Sense of Community as a Mediator between Supportive Social Systems, School Belongingness, and Outcome Behaviors among Urban High School Students of Color**

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**Psychological sense of community (SOC)** offers a framework to conceptualize the processes and outcomes of fostering youth development. Theories of psychological SOC (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), collective efficacy, neighboring (Long & Perkins, 2003), and sense of place (Convery, Corsane, & Davis, 2012; Niemeyer, 2004) have been defined as belongingness to a community or neighborhood and a collective belief that community members will meet one another’s needs (Lardier, Reid, & Garcia-Reid, 2018; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Integral to the achievement of psychological SOC is a feeling of emotional safety that is created by membership within the neighborhood or community, perceived belongingness to a group, and identification with and within a larger neighborhood or community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008). Brodsky (1996) also raised that psychological SOC is a bipolar construct, wherein a positive SOC drives individuals closer to the community and keeps them within its boundaries, and negative psychological SOC pushes community members away from the community, increasing social alienation. Elsewhere, however, Brodsky, Loomis and Marx (2002) discussed that a weak psychological SOC may not necessarily be problematic; instead, a weak psychological SOC may make community members more critical toward their community, which can effectuate social action. Nonetheless, the extant research has shown that psychological SOC functions as a positive indicator of development and well-being (Krauss, Kornbluh, & Zeldin, 2017; Lardier, 2018; Lardier, MacDonnell, Barrios, Garcia-Reid, & Reid 2017, Powell et al., 2017).

Psychological SOC encompasses four theoretical dimensions: membership in a group, emotional connection, influence, and needs fulfillment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Peterson et al., 2008a). Membership is defined as feelings of belongingness to the organization or community. Influence is defined as the perceived ability to make a difference in the group and feeling as though one matters as a member within the group. Needs fulfillment is defined as the belief that members in the group will be able to meet each other’s needs and through these relational experiences, resources will be shared. Emotional connection is defined as an emotional connection to the group, due to shared history and shared common places and experiences.

Scholars support that psychological SOC, as a process orientation, has a developmental cascading effect — defined as those cumulative developmental processes that occur through transaction and relational processes, which cut across multiple domains of influence (see Masten & Cicchetti, 2010 for a more comprehensive discussion) — that positively influences a community and individuals, as well as motivates people to participate within and among the collective group toward broader social change (Lardier, 2018, 2019; Long & Perkins, 2003). Psychological SOC has also been associated with access to supportive peer and adult networks, in addition to participation in and access to youth-based community organizations (Christens & Lin, 2014; Lardier, 2018, 2019). Several measures have been used to uncover psychological SOC such as the Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS; Lardier, MacDonnell et al., 2018b; Peterson et al., 2008b), which is identified as the most widely used measure of SOC. Though used in this study, the BSCS has been examined minimally among youth of color, and in relation to constructs that are implicated in promoting positive developmental outcomes (Lardier, 2018, 2019).

A key concept within community psychology is the ecological model of understanding social systems (Jason, Stevens, & Ram, 2015; Stevens, Jason, & Ferrari, 2011). This model encompasses three tiers including the “individual” (e.g., thoughts, behaviors, and feelings), the individual’s immediate network (e.g., family and peers), and the macro-system (e.g., governments, cultures, and societies). As highlighted in Sarason’s (1974) definition of psychological SOC — i.e., “the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure” (p.157) — individuals and groups are part of a larger system, which in-turn influences the thoughts, behaviors, actions, and emotions of an individual (i.e., those outcomes and perceptions that may be developmentally beneficial; Jason, Stevens, & Ram, 2015; Stevens, Jason, & Ferrari, 2011).

Consistent with this perspective, the extant empirical literature on the positive developmental trajectories of youth has taken an ecological perspective, and in-turn examining youth’s contexts and the ways in which these contexts impact development (Christens et al., 2012). Therefore, the primary aim of the current study is to understand psychological SOC within an ecological framework (Jason et al., 2015; Stevens et al., 2011) of forming social bonds, a supportive social system, developing community connections, and, therefore, experiencing individual outcomes and perceptions that are developmentally beneficial. We examine psychological SOC as a mediating variable between supportive social relationships (e.g., social support which includes parents, peers, and staff within the school, and participation in youth-based community programs) and outcomes including school belongingness, risk behaviors such as substance use and violent behavior, and psychological symptoms, including depression.

Moving forward, we review the literature on the nature of social support systems including families, teachers, and peers, as well as participation in youth-based community organizations, and the relationship with outcomes including school belongingness, risk behaviors (e.g., substance use and violent behavior), and depressive symptoms. Next, we review the research on positive development among youth and psychological SOC. We then make a conceptual case supporting psychological SOC as a mediating variable between social support and participation in youth-based community organizations, and outcomes including school belonginess, risk behaviors, and depressive symptoms.