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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MULTIDIMENSIONAL SENSE OF CONTROL INDEX AND ITS USE IN ANALYSING THE ROLE OF CONTROL IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SES AND HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

A robust and consistent relationship has been shown between socioeconomic status and health, and it has been suggested that psychosocial factors partially explain this relationship because they can operate at all levels of socioeconomic status (SES) and they can explain the findings concerning relative SES. The present research examined the proposal that control beliefs is one psychosocial factor which may explain the relationship between SES and health. Because of the complexity of the control field, care was taken to choose a suitable approach to control. Skinner’s conceptualisation, which was chosen, has three key aspects. One aspect is the differentiation between capacity beliefs and strategy beliefs. A second is that the approach argues that it is the combination of these two beliefs which produces a sense of control. The third aspect is the proposal that a sense of control can be gained through any ‘means’ when it is believed that the person has access to the ‘means’ of control. Multidimensional sense of control was the term given to describe this conceptualisation.

A Multidimensional Sense of Control Scale (MSOCS) was developed for the present study because no suitable measure was available. ‘Means’ of control were selected for inclusion in the MSOCS, items were written for these ‘means’ and a content analysis was performed. Exploratory factor analyses revealed sets of items which loaded highly on the appropriate factor with very few cross-loadings. Using an independent sample, the factor structure for five ‘means’ (ability, family, friends, luck, and money) was tested using confirmatory factor analysis. The hypothesised model fitted significantly better than competing models. The subscales showed reasonable internal reliability, convergent validity analyses revealed expected relationships and the subscales were also shown to have reasonable consistency over a six week period. As a whole, these analyses indicated that, while improvements could be made to the measure, it was of sufficient quality to be used in the present study.

The present study considered hypotheses concerning the role of sense of control (from the five distinct ‘means’ and overall) in the relationship between SES (education, household income and community deprivation) and health (self-reported). The sample of 580 was
drawn from the New Zealand Electoral Role and completed a mail questionnaire. Analyses were performed using multiple regression. All three indicators of SES were associated with health at the bivariate level, while only household income was independently associated once age was controlled and all three indicators were considered together. All indicators of SES were associated with an overall sense of control at the bivariate level. However, only level of educational attainment and level of household income were associated once age was controlled and all three indicators were considered together. Indicators of SES were positively associated with a sense of control through ‘ability’, ‘family’, ‘luck’, and ‘money’. However the relationship between SES and sense of control was not as simple as anticipated with different indicators of SES being associated with a sense of control through different ‘means’. Level of educational attainment was independently associated with a sense of control through ‘ability’ and ‘luck’ while level of household income was independently associated with a sense of control through ‘family’ and ‘money’. The direction of all relationships were in the hypothesised direction and some were in the opposite direction from that found using different measures of control beliefs, which is consistent with what was expected based on the multidimensional sense of control approach. A greater overall sense of control was positively associated with health while only a sense of control through ‘luck’ and ‘money’ were independently associated with health once age was controlled. Mediational analyses showed that both an overall sense of control and a sense of control through ‘money’ partially mediated the relationship between level of household income and health. This supported the suggestion by some authors that psychosocial factors will help explain the relationship between SES and health.

This thesis has made a number of important contributions to understanding in these areas. It has confirmed that capacity beliefs and strategy beliefs are different and so should be measured separately. It has also shown that beliefs about different ‘means’ of control differ and so these also should be measured separately. The hypothesis testing analyses showed that different indicators of SES are related to a sense of control from different ‘means’. These analyses also showed that an overall sense of control and a sense of control from ‘money’ mediated the relationship between household income and health. These issues are discussed in regard to the need for further research in these areas.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iii
Appendices ..................................................................................................................... xii
List of Figures ................................................................................................................ xiii
List of Tables ................................................................................................................... xiv

**Chapter One**

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SES AND HEALTH: GENERAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE ROLE OF PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS ........................................................................ 1

- Is an artifact of the data? ......................................................................................... 2
- Is it just Social Selection? ......................................................................................... 3
- Arguments Supporting Social Selection ................................................................... 4
  - The Limitations of Traditional Explanations ......................................................... 4
  - Living and Working Conditions ........................................................................... 5
  - Health Behaviours ............................................................................................... 6
  - Health Services Access and Utilisation ................................................................. 8
- The Gradient ............................................................................................................ 9
- Duration ................................................................................................................... 10
- Relative SES .......................................................................................................... 10
- Summary ................................................................................................................ 14

**Chapter Two**

CHOOSING AN APPROACH TO CONROL ..................................................................... 15

- Actual Control and Control Beliefs ........................................................................ 16
- Situational Control Beliefs and Stable Control Beliefs ........................................ 17
- Beliefs about Ability, Beliefs about Causation and a Sense of Control .............. 17
- Personal Control and Perceived Control ................................................................. 23
  - Personal Control .................................................................................................. 23
  - Perceived Control ............................................................................................... 25
  - Supporting Research ............................................................................................ 32
- Global Control Beliefs and Specific Control Beliefs ........................................... 38
Chapter Three

THE ROLE OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL SENSE OF CONTROL
IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SES AND HEALTH .......... 44

Multidimensional Sense of Control and Health .................. 45
Mechanisms by which Control might affect Health .............. 45
Health Behaviours ............................................. 45
Stress ......................................................... 46
Belief in Personal Control and Health .......................... 48
Belief in Control by External Means and Health ............ 50
Belief in Control by ‘Powerful Others’ ......................... 50
Belief in Control by Luck ...................................... 54
Belief in Control by God ....................................... 55
Belief in Control by Family and Friends .................... 57

Summary ................................................................. 58

SES and Multidimensional Sense of Control ................. 58
Belief in Personal Control ...................................... 58
Belief in Control by Luck .................................... 61
Belief in Control by God ....................................... 61
Belief in Control by Others .................................... 62

Summary ................................................................. 65

Multidimensional Sense of Control in the SES-Health Relationship ........ 66
Belief in Personal Control ...................................... 67
Mediational Studies .............................................. 67
Moderational Studies ............................................ 68
Belief in Control through External ‘Means’ ................ 69
Mediational Studies .............................................. 70
Moderational Study .............................................. 70

Summary ................................................................. 72
Chapter Four

HYPOTHESES OF THE PRESENT STUDY ........................................... 73
  SES and Health ........................................................................ 73
  SES and ‘Multidimensional Sense of Control’ ............................ 73
  ‘Multidimensional Sense of Control’ and Health ......................... 74
  ‘Multidimensional Sense of Control’ Mediating the SES-Health Relationship ......................................................... 74
  ‘Multidimensional Sense of Control’ Moderating the SES-Health Relationship ............................................................. 75

Chapter Five

DEVELOPMENT OF THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL SENSE OF CONTROL SCALE ........................................ 76
  Overview ................................................................................. 76
  Identification of ‘Means’ of Control ........................................... 76
    Open-Ended Interviews .......................................................... 76
    Other Theories and Measures .................................................. 77
  Item Development ................................................................. 78
  Content Analysis Study ............................................................ 81
    Method ................................................................................... 82
      Participants ......................................................................... 82
    Materials and Procedure ....................................................... 82
    Results .................................................................................... 82
    Discussion ............................................................................... 83
  Exploratory Factor Analysis ...................................................... 83
    Method ................................................................................... 84
      Participants ......................................................................... 84
      Questionnaire ..................................................................... 84
    Results .................................................................................... 85
      Initial Screening .................................................................... 85
      Outliers .............................................................................. 85
Chapter Six

FINAL DEVELOPMENTAL ANALYSES OF THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL SENSE OF CONTROL SCALE

Overview ................................................................. 101
Method for CFA and Convergent Validity Analysis .......................... 101
Design ........................................................................ 101
Participants ................................................................... 102
Data Collection Procedure ............................................. 104
Questionnaire Format ................................................... 104
The Measures ................................................................ 105
   Health Measures ...................................................... 105
   Psychological Measures ........................................... 105
      MSOCS .................................................................. 105
      Social Support ....................................................... 106
      Neuroticism ......................................................... 107
      Multidimensional Health Locus of Control .............. 108
      Optimism ............................................................. 109
      Self-Efficacy ......................................................... 111
      Self-Esteem .......................................................... 111
   Socio-demographic Measures .................................... 112
Screening for Inaccurate Data Input and Treatment of Missing Data ........................................................................ 112
Confirmatory Factor Analysis ........................................... 115
Selection of 'Means' to be Included .................................... 115
Assumptions ................................................................ 116
Model Estimation ......................................................... 117
Competing Models........................................................................ 118
Statistics Used to Analyse Fit...................................................... 126
Results of Goodness of Fit Comparison........................................ 127
Further Examination of Fit and Post Hoc Modifications............... 129
Subsequent Analysis of fit............................................................ 130
Testing the Effect of Post Hoc Changes on Parameter Estimates .... 130
Assessing the Internal Reliability of Each Latent Construct........ 131
Discussion.................................................................................. 131
Convergent and Discriminatory Validity Results ....................... 134
Design........................................................................................ 134
Assumptions.............................................................................. 135
Results...................................................................................... 136
  Internally Oriented Capacity Subscales (Ability) ....................... 136
  Internally Oriented Strategy Subscales (Ability) ....................... 137
  People Oriented Capacity Subscales (Friends and Family) ....... 137
  People Oriented Strategy Subscales (Friends and Family) ...... 138
  OtherExternally Oriented Capacity Subscales ....................... 138
  OtherExternally oriented Strategy Subscales ...................... 139
Discussion................................................................................. 141
Test-Retest Reliability Study...................................................... 142
Overview.................................................................................. 142
Method..................................................................................... 142
  Participants........................................................................... 142
  Questionnaire..................................................................... 143
  Procedure........................................................................... 144
Results..................................................................................... 144
  Missing Data...................................................................... 144
  Subscale Scores.................................................................. 144
  Assumptions..................................................................... 144
Discussion............................................................................... 146
Summary.................................................................................. 147
# Chapter Seven

**TESTING OF HYPOTHESES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method for Hypothesis Testing</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measures</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Calculation of Sense of Control Scores Using MSOCS Subscale Scores</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Problems</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF12</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Attainment</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deprivation Index</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Variables</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyses</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results for Hypothesis Testing</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Screening</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis One: Higher SES will be associated with better health</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bivariate Correlations</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regression Analyses</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES and PCS-12</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES and Health Problems</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypotheses 2 and 3: Higher SES will be associated with a greater sense of control</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bivariate Correlations</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Regression Analyses ................................................................. 161
  SES and Control Total .......................................................... 161
  SES and Ability Control ....................................................... 162
  SES and Family Control ....................................................... 163
  SES and Luck Control .......................................................... 164
  SES and Money Control ........................................................ 164
Summary .................................................................................. 165
Hypothesis Four and Five: A greater sense of control will be .......... 166
  associated with better health .................................................. 166
Bivariate Analyses .................................................................... 166
Regression Analyses .................................................................. 166
  Control Total and PCS-12 ....................................................... 167
  Ability Control, Luck Control and Money Control
  and PCS-12 ........................................................................... 167
  Control Total and Health Problems ......................................... 168
Summary .................................................................................. 169
Hypotheses Six and Seven: A sense of control will
  mediate the relationship between SES and health ...................... 169
The mediational role of Control Total in the relationship
  between Household Income 1 and the PCS-12 ......................... 170
The mediational role of Money Control in the relationship
  between Household Income 1 and the PCS-12 ......................... 172
The mediational role of Money Control in the relationship
  between Household Income 2 and the PCS-12 ......................... 173
The mediational role of Control Total in the relationship
  between Household Income 2 and Health Problems ................. 174
Summary .................................................................................. 176
Hypotheses Eight and Nine: A sense of control will
  moderate the relationship between SES and health ................... 176
Chapter Eight
DISCUSSION OF HYPOTHESIS TESTING ............................................. 178

Hypothesis One: Higher SES will be associated with better health .......... 178
Hypothesis Two: Higher SES will be associated with a greater
'overall sense of control' ........................................................................ 180
Hypothesis Three: Higher SES will be associated with a greater
sense of control from all 'means' ............................................................... 181
Summary ..................................................................................................... 185
Hypothesis Four: A greater 'overall sense of control' will be
associated with better health ................................................................. 186
Hypothesis Five: A greater sense of control through all 'means'
will be associated with better health ....................................................... 186
Hypothesis Six: 'Overall sense of control' will mediate the relationship
between SES and health ........................................................................... 189
Hypothesis Seven: A sense of control through all 'means' will
mediate the relationship between SES and health .................................. 190
Hypothesis Eight: An 'overall sense of control' will
moderate the relationship between SES and health ............................... 192
Hypothesis Nine: A sense of control through each 'means' will
moderate the relationship between SES and health ............................... 192
General Limitations .................................................................................. 193
Future Research ....................................................................................... 195
Summary ..................................................................................................... 196
Conclusion .................................................................................................. 197

References .................................................................................................. 199
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix One</th>
<th>Items included in the Pilot Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Two</td>
<td>Items included in the Content Analysis Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Three</td>
<td>Standardized instructions, a written outline of the theory and definitions of capacity beliefs and strategy beliefs for Content Analysis Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Four</td>
<td>Questionnaire used for the Exploratory Factor Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Five</td>
<td>First contact letter for the main data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Six</td>
<td>Second contact letter for the main data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Seven</td>
<td>Mail-out questionnaire for the main data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Eight</td>
<td>Postcard for the main data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Nine</td>
<td>Final reminder letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Ten</td>
<td>Questionnaire for test-retest reliability study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1  Skinner's conceptualisation: A distinction among three kinds of beliefs 19

Figure 6.1  Model A with five subscales (in circles) and the items comprising each subscale (in rectangles) 120

Figure 6.2  Model B with four subscales (in circles) and the items comprising each subscale (in rectangles) 121

Figure 6.3  Model C with two subscales (in circles) and the items comprising each subscale (in rectangles) 122

Figure 6.4  Model D with eight subscales (in circles) and the items comprising each subscale (in rectangles) 123

Figure 6.5  Model E with four subscales (in circles) and the items comprising each subscale (in rectangles) 124

Figure 6.6  Model F with ten subscales (in circles) and the items comprising each subscale (in rectangles) 125

Figure 7.1  Path diagram depicting the role of Control Total in mediating the effect of Household Income 1 on scores on the PCS-12 171

Figure 7.2  Path diagram depicting the role of Money Control in mediating the effect of Household Income 1 on scores on the PCS-12 174

Figure 7.3  Path diagram depicting the role of Control Total in mediating The effect of Household Income 1 on Health Problems 176
Table 5.1 Subscales for MSOCS ................................................................. 81

Table 5.2 Pattern Matrix for Exploratory Factors Analysis of Items of the Ability Capacity, Ability Strategy, Effort Capacity, Effort Strategy and Control Belief Subscales ................................................................. 91

Table 5.3 Eigenvalues and Percentage Variance Explained for the Exploratory Factors Analysis of Items from the Ability Capacity, Ability Strategy, Effort Capacity, Effort Strategy and Control Belief Subscales ................................................................. 92

Table 5.4 Pattern Matrix for Exploratory Factors Analysis of Items from the Family Capacity, Family Strategy, Friend Capacity and Friend Subscales ................................................................. 93

Table 5.5 Eigenvalues and Percentage Variance Explained for the Exploratory Factors Analysis of Items from the Family Capacity, Family Strategy, Friend Capacity and Friend Strategy Subscales ................................................................. 94

Table 5.6 Pattern Matrix for Exploratory Factors Analysis of Items from the God Capacity, God Strategy, Boss Capacity and Boss Strategy Subscales ................................................................. 95

Table 5.7 Eigenvalues and Percentage Variance Explained for the Exploratory Factors Analysis of Items from the God Capacity God Strategy, Boss Capacity and Boss Strategy Subscales ................................................................. 96
Table 5.8  Pattern Matrix for Exploratory Factors Analysis of Items from the Money Capacity, Money Strategy, Luck Capacity and Luck Strategy Subscales ................................................................. 97

Table 5.9  Eigenvalues and Percentage Variance Explained for the Exploratory Factors Analysis of Items from the Money Capacity Money Strategy, Luck Capacity and Luck Strategy Subscales .......... 98

Table 5.10 Internal Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha coefficients) for the MSOCS Subscales .......................................................................................................................... 99

Table 6.1  Ethnicity, Work Situation, Highest Educational Qualification, Income and Living Situation of Questionnaire Respondents ............. 103

Table 6.2  Fit Indices for the Six Models ......................................................................................... 128

Table 6.3  Internal Reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha) for the MSOCS Subscales ................................................................. 131

Table 6.4  Means and Standard Deviations of the Scales for the Convergent and Discriminant Validity Analysis.............................. 135

Table 6.5  Correlation Matrix of Relationships between the MSOCS Subscales and Other Scales Chosen for Validation ...................... 140

Table 6.6  Ethnicity and Highest Educational Qualification ......................................................... 143

Table 6.7  Means and Standard Deviations of the MSOCS Subscales in the Test-Retest Analysis ......................................................................................... 145

Table 6.8  Test-Retest Reliability for the MSOCS Subscales ...................... 146
Table 7.01  Correlations for Scores for Sense of Control through Ability, Family, Friend, Luck, and Money ................................................................. 150

Table 7.02  Mean Health Problems and PCS-12 Scores for Education and Household Income .................................................................................. 157

Table 7.03  Bivariate Correlations Between Measures of SES and Physical Health ......................................................................................... 158

Table 7.04  Hierarchical Multiple Regression of PCS-12 on Education 1, Household Income 1, Household Income 2, and NZDep96 Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) .................................................................................. 159

Table 7.05  Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Health Problems on Education 1, Household Income 1, and Household Income 2 Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$). ......................................................... 160

Table 7.06  Bivariate Correlations Between Measures of SES and Sense of Control Scores .................................................................................. 161

Table 7.07  Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Control Total on SES Variables Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ..................................................... 162

Table 7.08  Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Ability Control on Education 1, Education 2, Education 3, Household Income 1, and Household Income 2 Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ......................... 163
Table 7.09  Multiple Regression of Family Control on Household Income 1 and NZDep96 Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) .............................................. 164

Table 7.10  Multiple Regression of Luck Control on Education 1, Education 2, and Household Income 2 Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ................................................................. 164

Table 7.11  Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Money Control on SES Variables Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ................................................................. 165

Table 7.12  Bivariate Correlations Between Measures of health and Sense of Control Scales .................................................................................................................. 166

Table 7.13  Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Control Total on PCS-12 Scores Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ................................................................. 167

Table 7.14  Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Ability Control, Luck Control, and Money Control on PCS-12 Scores Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ................................................................. 168

Table 7.15  Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Control Total on Health Problems Scores Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ................................................................. 168
Table 7.16  Hierarchical Multiple Regression Testing the Mediational Role of Control Total in the Relationship Between Household Income 1 and PCS-12 Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ................................................................. 170

Table 7.17  Hierarchical Multiple Regression Testing the Mediational Role of Money Control in the Relationship Between Household Income 1 and PCS-12 Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ........................................................................ 172

Table 7.18  Hierarchical Multiple Regression Testing the Mediational Role of Money Control in the Relationship Between Household Income 2 and PCS-12 Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ........................................................................ 173

Table 7.19  Hierarchical Multiple Regression Testing the Mediational Role of Control Total in the Relationship Between Household Income 1 and Health Problems Showing Standardised Regression Coefficients (Beta), adjusted $R^2$, $R^2$ Change and $F$ Change ($N = 585$) ........................................................................ 175