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Dr. Patricia A. Hendricks and the Targeting Life Skills Model: An Oral History

Abstract

The targeting life skills model created by Dr. Patricia A. Hendricks represents the skills developed by youths participating in 4-H. The model is used to identify desired learning and action outcomes of positive youth development programs. An article related to the origins and validation of the model was never published. This oral history describes Hendricks's Extension background, explains the circumstances that led her to create the model, traces the model's genesis, and reveals why the model lacks empirical validation and confirmation. The research-referenced, universally accepted model remains a valuable and systematic approach to planning and engaging youths in high-quality youth development experiences.

Keywords: [Patricia A. Hendricks](#), [Patricia A. Smith](#), [targeting life skills model](#), [positive youth development](#), [oral history](#)

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Introduction

The targeting life skills model (TLSM) conceived by Dr. Patricia A. Hendricks (now Smith; Hendricks, 1998) has informed the subject of life skills development for more than 2 decades. It surfaced as a research-based framework along with CHARACTER COUNTS, the Essential Elements of 4-H Youth Development, and Soft Skills that Foster Youth Workforce Development (Arnold et al., 2016).

Hendricks's model was novel and groundbreaking. It represented an attempt to demonstrate the 4-H program's worthiness of public trust in light of the Government Performance Results Act of 1993. The act held publicly funded programs to new standards of accountability. The TLSM began out of the need to define concepts promoted as basic to the 4-H program and to evaluate their impact on youth development (P. A. Hendricks, personal communication, December 17, 2015).

The TLSM involves use of a systematic approach to provide high-quality youth development experiences leading to life skills development. The model aligns 35 life skills with the four components of the 4-H pledge: Head, Heart, Hands and Health. Although the manual containing the TLSM (Hendricks, 1998) is often cited, the literature base lacks a seminal article related to the genesis, development, dissemination, and testing of the model.

Purpose

To address the aforementioned gap, we conducted oral history research using a reminiscence and community model (Abrams, 2016) to recover Hendricks's voice and place it in the historical record within the positive youth development literature base. Our work explains the circumstances that created the need for the TLSM; traces the model's development, dissemination, and use; and reveals why the model lacks empirical validation and confirmation. Our goal was not to validate the TLSM as a positive youth development framework.

Background

The TLSM is used by researchers, practitioners, and educators in curriculum development, program planning, instrument development, program assessment, and outcome identification (Arnold et al., 2016). Specifically, the model is used mostly to identify "desired learning and action outcomes of PYD [positive youth development] programs" (Arnold & Silliman, 2017, p. 13). The model is used in instrument development and testing (Allen & Lohman, 2016; Duerden et al., 2012; Guion & Rivera, 2008; Klem & Nicholson, 2008; Luckey & Nadelson, 2011; Miltenberger et al., 2009; Olson et al., 2014). It is employed to describe skills developed in various 4-H activities and events (Arnold et al., 2005). It is applied to assess the impact 4-H has on adult civic engagement (Pennington & Edwards, 2006) and the influence on specific skills needed in adulthood (Maass et al., 2006). Brandt and Stowe (2017) used the TLSM to help enhance urban and suburban youth teamwork and communication skills.

The TLSM has limitations. A review of research-driven, research-based, and research-adapted positive youth development frameworks revealed that the TLSM met the criteria of a framework (Heck & Subramaniam, 2009). The model gave programs direction and purpose, guided programs toward outcomes, identified programmatic outcomes, and guided the evaluation of programs (Arnold et al., 2016). However, lacking is empirical evidence confirming that the identified life skills are the ones most critical to youth development (Arnold et al., 2016).

Methodology

The Oral History Association (n.d.) contends that "oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events" (Oral History: Defined, para. 1). Further, oral history, according to Abrams (2016), is "a tried and tested research practice, embedded not only in historical research but also in a wide range of disciplines including ethnology, anthropology, sociology, health-care studies and psychology" (p. 2).

The oral history research we present here involved conducting and audio recording an interview, transcribing the recording, and interpreting what was heard and read to create a durable, publically consumable, narrative account of the past (Abrams, 2016). As shown in Table 1, we drew our methodology from the works of Abrams (2016), Brown (1988), Hagens et al. (2009), and Jacob and Furgerson (2012).

Table 1.
Oral History Methodology Used

Step	Action taken
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1. Identify topic and subject.	Picked a topic of interest. Reviewed the literature surrounding the topic and the subject. ^a
2. Determine approaches.	Selected a model that recovered a voice and placed it in the historical record (reminiscence and community model). ^b
3. Create initial list of questions.	Gathered potential interview questions from Extension researchers, practitioners, and educators from land-grant universities and the National 4-H Headquarters who were familiar with the topic and subject. Organized questions to start with basics (interviewee background). Staged questions to progress from easy to more complex and allow the interviewee to respond from several directions. ^a
4. Review questions.	Eliminated questions that were leading or biased in such a way as to direct the interviewee to respond in a predetermined manner.
5. Make preinterview contact with interviewee.	Communicated oral history intent with interviewee. Obtained interviewee consent. Made arrangements for interview. Forwarded questions to interviewee. Identified setting that was a comfortable and familiar place to conduct the interview. Reflected together with interviewee on the interview and next steps. ^c
6. Apply appropriate interview duration.	Limited interview to 90 min. ^a
7. Transcribe interview.	Transcribed all interview content, including interviewee filler words and dialect, interviewer fumbles and digressions, and standard and dialectal English, and transcribed for readability without sacrificing revelation of the interviewee's personality. ^c
8. Facilitate interviewee transcription review.	Allowed the interviewee the ability to provide corrections, clarification, and additional content. Added interviewee edits and additions to transcript. ^d
9. Interpret, edit, sequence, attend to audience, shape, apply transitions.	Removed interviewee filler words, interviewer commentaries, and text that did not add to the history. Omitted material that was memorable in defining the personality/character of the interviewee but did not fit the feature story being told. ^c
10. Develop product of research (article), attending to transitions and editing.	Started with description and something interesting about setting where interview took place. Created thumbnail sketch of interviewee's life. Ended with description of feel of scene of interview, interviewee, and topic. Read through text for sequence, balance, timing, transitions, dialect, and paragraph readability.
11. Communicate results.	Communicated to readers the intent of the oral history—to gather, preserve, and interpret a voice and memories through a first-person account. The account is a summarized transcript of the interview, subject to article guidelines. ^e The audio recording, complete transcript, and manual are available at https://beav.es/4yA .

^a Jacob & Furgerson (2012). ^b Abrams (2016). ^c Brown (1988). ^d Hagens et al. (2009). ^e Oral History Association

(n.d.).

Result: The Oral History

Setting

We met Dr. Patricia A. Hendricks in 2017 at the Green Gateau Restaurant in Lincoln, Nebraska. The restaurant was a familiar place for Hendricks, and one of her former 4-H club members was a chef there.

Interview

Authors: Tell us about yourself, your roles in Extension, and what you were doing at the time you created the targeting life skills model.

Hendricks: After graduating from the University of Nebraska in 1958, I became an Extension home economist in Nebraska. Due to Extension policies at the time, my marriage to a county agent required me to quit my job. For 20 years, I volunteered, judged county fairs, and led 4-H clubs. After I completed my master's degree in 1981, I became an Extension child and family development specialist for six counties in Missouri. I was later employed in Kansas City, Kansas, as a home economist/4-H agent in the inner city. Then I went to Wyoming as a home economist with a 4-H assignment. I came back to the University of Nebraska as a program development specialist while working in a doctoral program until 1990. From there, I went to the University of Idaho as a state 4-H curriculum specialist. Later, Iowa State hired me as a state 4-H youth development specialist for curriculum, and I retired from there. I've had lots of assignments, but being a youth development specialist working on curriculum was one I really enjoyed.

Authors: Tell us about the conditions in Extension that prompted the development of the model?

Hendricks: It was at a time when the federal partners said that we had to be accountable for the money given to Extension programs. We needed to evaluate programs, and we needed to have some hard-core evidence that they were doing some good.

When kindergarten-through-third-grade programs were initiated, I thought we needed to define life skills in a way that they could be applied as age appropriate at a younger level. It may be the same life skills, but we can't teach them in the same way. So that's what started me thinking about addressing life skills differently for children of different ages. When I got back to my office, I looked at a lot of the materials and saw that I couldn't even define what some of the concepts were. So how could I evaluate them?

I had to start from the beginning, and I had to define what these skills meant so that I could then evaluate what was intended for the young kids to learn.

I went in my office, shut the door, took newsprint, sat on the floor, and started drawing pictures. I don't know why it came to me to put it on a wheel with the 4-H Clover in the middle, but it worked magic. I divided skills according to the four leaves—Head, Heart, Hands, and Health—and each one of those broke down into two parts. Then I looked up life skill definitions and divided each of them into components or concepts that we could measure.

Another youth development specialist at Iowa State went over my plan so I would know that I was getting the ages and stages broken down in a way that made sense. I just sat down and started drawing, and then, after I got the design, my editor took it over to the information technology office on campus and the artist drew the model as you see it. It just came out of my head. I was discussing it with my daughter on the phone one evening. She, working on a child development/education degree at the time said, "Oh! You are targeting life skills." The name was perfect for the design.

Authors: Why was the model so universally accepted in 4-H?

Hendricks: I think because of the 4-H Cooperative Curriculum System (CCS). I was on that committee. I was conducting training for people who came to the meetings, so I think that's why the committee picked up on it. I also trained volunteers. The life skills concepts didn't mean much to them until I put the targeting life skills model up on the screen and explained the connection of the categories to 4-H, the skills being taught, the concepts or component parts of the skills, and how defining them allowed them to be evaluated. Then they got it. It was the visual that helped them see.

Authors: Tell us about the validation of the model.

Hendricks: My assignment was program development and improvement, and training. I had no research assignment. They wanted me to get the evaluation out there as soon as possible. I searched the literature base and read the articles about similar youth development programs that focused on developing life skills. I noted where the skills overlapped and so forth. I simply cataloged the life skills that were being addressed across several formats. There's a bibliography in the manual of the articles I read, and that was the best we had at the time.

We couldn't get a long-term effect because of the turnover of kids in programs and the variations in the way the programs were taught. We didn't have a control group. We couldn't deliver 4-H to some and not others. There was no research on the validity of self-report by young children. We also used reporting of the leaders, but they didn't have comparable backgrounds in training and experience, and methods different leaders used were not all equally effective. I called someone at the research department on campus who said, "What you have going for you is numbers. You've got thousands of kids who are going to do this and so you're going to have to go with just averages of these thousands of kids who were in Iowa." The person in the research department said, "This is the best you can do with this population at this time." That is why we didn't get any hard research out of it. I would like to have had time to write an article or report of the process. After I trained people in 37 states, my funding for development and travel ended and my time was applied to conducting evaluations in Iowa.

Authors: How did you identify the life skills to include in the model?

Hendricks: I studied a number of youth development and education programs. I found that 4-H was incorporating a wider variety of life skills using a number of methods. A lot of them overlapped because of different projects people were doing. I tried to match up the educational style of the programs as much as I could. That's where the list of skills in the manual came from. Not everybody agreed with my definitions. In the manual, I stated that if you can better define a skill according to your program to measure the components that you're trying to teach, that's fine. It's the process of being able to define the skill and measure it that counts.

Authors: How did you share the model with different youth professionals?

Hendricks: We published the first manual in 1996. It was revised in 1998. It was available to all the states. I talked to Extension educators and volunteers to get feedback on how they used it and whether it was beneficial. One person in another state didn't like the definition I had for resiliency. I was fine with their redefining the life skills to make them more descriptive of their programs. They needed to define them to report their successes.

Authors: Did you envision that this was going to be a model for positive youth development?

Hendricks: No. I didn't even have time to think about that. I was so busy getting it on paper and making it useful. These ideas just kept whirling around. I had no idea. Working within CCS was where I really saw it come to fruition. The value of the model is to incorporate learning of life skills along with useful information simultaneously in an activity. The skill is the delivery method for the information. 4-H is based on experiential learning.

Authors: Did the model achieve its goal or outcome?

Hendricks: It was better than I'd hoped. I would see people I knew using it, and I saw states using it to create evaluation pieces of their own. I'm very rewarded by seeing that. I saw the model translated into several other languages and used in other countries and the military. I'm amazed. I had no idea at the time.

Authors: Did you see any shortcomings of the model?

Hendricks: I did what I could between 1996 and 1998. I don't have any regrets about that. I lived this for the 2 years I did it. I traveled all over, talked to people. That was about all I did during that short time. Had I been able to stay longer and have more funding to work on it, I don't know that I would have changed it anyway because it works. I think it is too bad that the manual is no longer available. The real value of the model requires the "how-to" from the manual.

Authors: Do you have recommendations for continued work on the next phase of the model?

Hendricks: First of all, it's been 20 years, and research shows that kids today are different. For one thing, kids have difficulty focusing. I think that focus is one skill I would consider under thinking and learning, working with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, improving attention span and motivation.

Another thought would be to include understanding the use of technology and its wide-ranging consequences. Kids are more economically stable, they don't have to work, and many of them don't get out and learn to work. A lot of their time is being taken up with gaming and social media, without understanding the consequences.

Some other considerations I'd like to see addressed are tolerance, open-mindedness, objective thinking, more acceptance of differences. Cooperation is on the wheel, but working together is a big challenge in today's world. There are lots of kids involved in community service, but there are also lots of kids who don't understand the importance of service. I also like the feel of self-awareness instead of self-esteem because it allows you to understand other people as well as yourself and how other people perceive you, rather than just building your own self-worth. It's about how you respond to other people and how they respond to you.

Authors: How do you think the model should be used or understood in the 21st century?

Hendricks: I can see after 20 years that some different life skills need to be emphasized. I think the model is pretty all-inclusive, and you could get whatever you want from one or another of the skills on the wheel. If it works and if they can define it in measurable ways, I don't think it's against anybody adding another life skill or identifying another way to deliver it. It's still important to be able to evaluate that you're making a difference. If you can show that it's making a difference in a positive way, I have no problem with that.

Authors: Is there a point at which an individual can say he or she has mastered a life skill?

Hendricks: The only way I can explain this is that whenever kids learn, whether or not they are aware of it, they have something they want to learn, they have a goal. For a while, they may learn the skills that get them to that objective. They want to get a first job. So they learn the skills and master the ones to get that job. If they want a better job, they have to go back and master another level of skills. It's a continuation. It's age and stage appropriate. I don't think you ever get to the point where you can't learn more. Kids themselves change their own goals, which changes the skills they need to work on. The world is becoming much more complex, and the skills they continually need to refine or define are going to be constantly changing.

Authors: What else would you like others to know about the model?

Hendricks: I think the first thing is that I want them to know it works. It's been proven to work. It makes sense to a lot of people. It can make learning fun because you put information to use in practical ways. You don't have to make it hard work. It's colorful, active, involved, and fun.

Reflection

Our evening's repast and interview seemed to go by so quickly. We left knowing that Hendricks's work had transformed the way the youth development community engaged youth and measured life skills. The universally accepted model still has meaning today: "The targeting life skills model remains a solid and useful tool for curriculum development, program planning, instrument development, program assessment, and outcome reporting related to the 4-H experience" (Arnold et al., 2016, p. 47).

Implications for Youth Development Practice

The life skills identified by Hendricks in the late 1990s have broadened. The term "skills" is giving way to "competencies," suggesting "society's desire that all students attain levels of mastery—across multiple areas of skill and knowledge—that were previously unnecessary for individual success in education and the workplace" (National Research Council, 2012, p. 3).

Although the TLSM is recognized as being research referenced (Arnold & Silliman, 2017), it does lack empirical validation as a framework and is absent any empirical confirmation of the skills organized under the four Hs (Arnold & Silliman, 2017). The lack of rigorous testing should persuade researchers, practitioners, and educators to consider developing a 21st century TLSM. Doing so would provide insight regarding those life skills that are central to positive youth development. Still, the 4-H community can benefit from use of the existing TLSM to intentionally and systematically plan high-quality youth development experiences.

We created a historical record and preserved a voice to help the youth development community better

understand the reasons behind the TLSM's swift creation and its shortcomings. We encourage those interested in obtaining a deeper understanding of the TLSM to carry on the conversation.

Author Note

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