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# Strengthening of parenthood; developing a Life Skills Questionnaire for Dutch Parents (LSQ-P)

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#### Abstract

Life skills of parents have a positive effect on the wellbeing of parents and development of children. Currently, no reliable instrument is available to measure these skills. This study was set up to develop a questionnaire for assessing parents' life skills. The questionnaire was developed for professionals who are working with parents and for building behavioral interventions enhancing the wellbeing of parents. A pilot research using a translation of the Life Skills Scale (Erawan, 2010) was conducted. Construct validity and reliability by means of confirmatory factor analysis of nine scales were examined in a sample of 133 Dutch parents and reliability of the scales in terms of Cronbach's alpha was examined. Evidence for construct validity of the scales was found. Reliability coefficients were satisfactory for the scales Critical thinking, Social responsibility, Interpersonal relationships, Decision making, Self-awareness, and Creative thinking. Reliability coefficients were good for Empathy and Self-esteem. The LSQ-P can be used in social work practice as an assessment tool to measure strengths and weaknesses regarding life skills of parents. More attention for developing life skills of parents is necessary in order to increase their wellbeing. Implications for health promotion among parents are discussed. Suggestions for further research and development of the scales are outlined.

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#### 1. Introduction

Being a parent entails more than just raising your children. Parents also have their own concerns, wishes, problems and characteristics and need to fulfill various roles in life, such as being a partner, an educator, a friend or

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an employee (Gravesteijn, 2015; Van der Pas, 2005). Parents have many diverse responsibilities and/or activities. On one hand, parenthood is highly valued and parenthood knows many rewards, such as affection and the fulfillment of reproductive needs (Nelson, Kushlev, Lyubomirsky, 2014). On the other hand, however, parenthood consistently demonstrates a negative effect on parental well-being, a great deal of stress, depressions and many concerns (Baumeister, 1991; Evenson & Simon, 2005; Galinsky, 1987; Gravesteijn & Petterson, 2014; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). When parents are experiencing stress at work or have problems in their relationship, this can make it even more difficult for them to raise their children which in turn affects their well-being (McKeown, Pratschke, & Haase, 2003). Parental well-being is the degree at which parents are pleased with themselves, their lives and the quality of their parent-child relation. Also contributing to this well-being are sufficiently developed parental skills, such as consistent disciplinary practices and use of praise, which can influence the behavior of their children in a positive way (Vermulst, Kroes, Nguyen, & Veerman, 2012). In fact, research (De Coulon, Meschi, & Vignoles, 2011; Sameroff, 2009) shows that parental well-being correlates positively with parenting skills and the development and well-being of their children. Therefore, focusing on the factors that contribute to parental well-being is of great importance in order to support parents and –ultimately- their children.

Several factors affect parental well-being, such as individual factors of parents, family functioning and social support (Feinberg, Jones, Roettger, Solmeyer, & Hostetler, 2014; Gravesteijn, 2015; Hogg & Worth, 2009). A major individual factor which contributes positively to parental well-being, is the ability to make effective use of so-called life skills (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999; WHO, 2003). Life skills are defined as social and emotional skills that enable individuals to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life (CASEL, 2013; WHO, 2003). The World Health Organization (2003) and Durlak and colleagues (2011) identified the following life skills: critical thinking, creative thinking, self-awareness, empathy, self-esteem, social responsibility, interpersonal relationship and communication, decision making and problem solving and coping with emotions and stress.

#### 2. Importance of life skills in parenthood

Programs that focused on improving parents' life skills, show a positive effect on the well-being of parents and the life skills of their children (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999; McKeown et al., 2003; Society for Research in Child Development, 2007; Tebes, Grady & Snow, 1988). Next, the life skills are described, together with their individual importance on parenthood.

*Empathy*- Being empathetic make individuals able to understand and accept others who may be very different from themselves, improves social interactions and encourages nurturing behavior towards others in need (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 1997). Studies (Barnett, King, Howard, & Dino, 1980; Strayer & Roberts, 2004) show that the use of parents' empathy towards their children, influences the empathic skills and development of their children.

Self-esteem- It helps individuals if they value themselves positively, are proud of their abilities and have confidence in themselves (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 1997). A study shows (Small, 1988) the positive effect of parental self-esteem on parents and the skills of their children. Research also shows that parental self-esteem is negatively associated with children's behavioral problems. Finken & Amato (1993) conclude that parents who experience major problems with their children showed significantly less self-esteem, as compared to parents without these problems. Firestone (2011) describes the relationship between parent's own self-esteem and the self-esteem of their children. Parents that show high self-esteem serve as an example for their children –and vice versa- thus influencing the children's self-esteem in either a positive- or negative manner.

Self-awareness- If individuals are aware of themselves, they recognize their own character, strengths and weaknesses, desires and dislikes (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 1997). For parents, this skill helps to react and interact with people and their children in ways that are congruent with who they want to be (Tartakovsky, 2014). Self-aware helps parents to better understand their own behavior and reactions and may assist them in consciously controlling their parenting style (Tartakovsky, 2014).

Social responsibility- Contributing to the well-being of individuals, is recognizing themselves as a part of the society and taking responsibility in social advances and degradation (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 1997). Children learn social responsibility from the words and messages they interpret from interactions with their parents, and how to behave in a socially responsible way (Bagheai, 2005).

Interpersonal relationship skills and communication- These skills mean that individuals can express themselves, both verbally and non- verbally and ask for advice and help in time of need (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 1997). Research shows (Feinberg et al., 2014, McKeown, Pratschke & Haase, 2003) that it is important for parents to develop and support relationship skills, such as communicating with their partner, as these are crucial for the well-being of families. A study of Feinberg, et al. (2014) indicates that a program focuses on enhancing relationship skills and communication can have a positive long-term impact on children.

Decision making and problem solving- Individuals benefit from assessing different options and effects of decisions, before they actually make these decisions, and from constructively dealing with problems in their lives (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 1997). Problem solving skills have a major influence on the parent- child - and partner-relationship and ultimately on the well-being of parents and their children (McKeown, et al., 2003; Society for Research in Child Development, 2007).

Coping with emotions and stress - It is useful to recognize emotions and to be able to respond appropriately to these emotions. Also beneficial for the well-being of individuals, is the ability to recognize sources of stress, how these affect them, and how they can reduce these (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 1997). Experiencing negative emotions and not reacting appropriately to these emotions, has a negative effect on parents' well-being and their parenting behaviors (Rutherford, Wallace, Laurent, & Mayes, 2015). By contrast, if parents respond supportive to their children's negative emotions, this has been found to be related to aspects of emotional and social competence, including children's emotion understanding and friendship quality (McElwain, Halberstadt, & Volling, 2007).

Critical thinking- When individuals are able to think critically, they analyze information and experiences in an objective manner. This supports them in recognizing and assessing the factors that influence attitudes and behavior (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 1997). Parents often worry about doing the right thing with their children and are struggling to find better ways to make decisions about their children. They are bombarded with books, magazines, the internet and friends' conflicting advice. It helps parents to think critically so they transcend trendy and popular methods of parenting by using sound and logical criteria to guide decision making (Connel-Carrick, 2006).

Creative thinking- Creative thinking aids individuals to respond adaptively and with flexibility to the situations in their daily lives and to think differently from others (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 1997). On the one hand, parents employing creative thinking can raise their children to show above-average creativity and problem-finding and problem-solving skills by recognizing potential in their children (Anning & Ring, 2004; Brzeziński, 1993) On the other hand, parents can impede children's creativity (Anning & Ring, 2004). Some parents find it difficult to recognize creative thinking in their children, as creative behavior is sometimes mistaken as being disobedient or even rebellious (Brzeziński, 1993).

## 2.1. Improving life skills in parents

Studies (McElwain, et al., 2007; Small, 1988) show life skills in parents contribute positively to the development of their children, as they are a role model to them. Also, parents respond more positively to their children. In contrary, research also shows that a lack of life skills in parents can have a negative impact on the development of their children (Fabes et al., 1999; Roberts & Strayer, 1987; Zeifman, 2003). Therefore, professionals benefit from having a reliable and validated measurement instrument which can measure the life skills in parents. This allows professionals to determine whether parents have sufficiently developed their skills and on which skills the parents can use their support. This support assists parents in fulfilling their main task in their adult lives, namely raising their children.

## 2.2. Development of the Life Skills Questionnaire for Parents (LSQ-P)

Various researchers have investigated the outcome of programs and developed a variety of instruments for adolescents and children to measure life skills in each component, such as the Coping Inventory (Willis, 1986), the Decision Making Questionnaire (Gerswick, et al., 1988) and the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985). Since the promotion of life skills, there is only one reliable and validated instrument suited for measuring life skills in terms of WHO definitions. However, this measurement is only for adolescents. Currently, questionnaires for

parents only focus on parenting skills (OBVL, 2011), problems in their children (SEV, 2005) or family functioning (VGF, 2000) and no validated life skills questionnaire based on WHO definition is available to assess individual life skills of parents.

For this reason, an existing questionnaire containing the life skills in terms of the WHO definitions (Erawan, 2010) was translated into Dutch. Erawan (2010) developed a self-report questionnaire to measure life skills for adolescents in Thailand. Experts from diverse regions of Thailand, having field experience with developing life skills in students, or any experiences concerned with promoting life skills of students, identified several life skills by gaining consensus on the behavioral indicators within the various life skill domains. These behavioral indicators were then constructed into nine life skill scales. Analysis shows, that this life skill scale obtains high reliability and criterion-related validity, as well as construct validity. In order to create a brief and simplified measure for a wide range of parents, items that consisted of long or multiple sentences and items containing difficult language, were rephrased or dismissed.

The current study investigates the Life Skills Questionnaire for Parents to assess various life skills in a select amount of parents. The aim of the present study is to investigate the value of the life skill scales, adapted from Erawan (2010), to assess life skills in parents. After constructing the scales, construct validity and internal consistency reliability were examined by means of confirmatory factor analysis and reliability analysis.

#### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through schools and indoor playgrounds in the Netherlands. The total sample consisted of N = 133 parents, n = 109 (82%) mothers, n = 24 (18%) fathers; mean age of respondents was 42.56 years (Min. = 26, Max. = 69, SD = 8.281). From this sample n = 131 (98.5%) were biological parents. Most of the parents had two children (n = 69, 51.9%), n = 33 (24.8%) parents had one child, n = 27 (20.3%) parents had three children, n = 2 parents had four children (1.5%), n = 1 parent had five children (0.8%) and n = 1 parent had six or more children (0.8%) at the time of measurement. The children of the parents had various age ranges; 0-5 years (n = 67); 6-11 years (n = 33); 12-17 years (n = 27); 24 years and older (n = 11).

The majority of parents had a relationship with the biological parent or was married to the biological parent of their child (n = 99, 74.4%), n = 19 (14.3%) parents were in a relationship or married to a different person than the biological parent and n = 15 (11.5%) parents were single at the time of measurement. From the total sample, the majority of parents was born in the Netherlands (n = 127, 95.5%) and had achieved a higher educational degree (n = 99, 74.4%).

#### 3.2. Procedure

Data was collected using a Computer- Assisted Self- Interviewing technique (CASI). Participants were asked to complete the (online) questionnaire (containing the life skills scales), along with some demographic items such as age, sex, education level, etcetera. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail and also provided information about the purpose of the study. Participants were told their answers would only be accessed by the researchers. All participants participated voluntarily and signed an informed consent form.

Prior to data-collection, the questionnaire was tested in a small sample of 10 parents. Based on the feedback provided by the parents some items were modified. The questionnaire was then put online, using Parantion (an online survey program). The online survey program required participants to fill out each question before continuing to the next question. Therefore, all participants filled out the questionnaire completely.

### 3.3. Questionnaire

Self-esteem. The self-esteem scale contains eight items, measuring the extent to which a person is able
to recognize his or her values such as being generous, giving and taking, exploring and being proud of

- one's own abilities in general (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 2003). An example of an item on this scale is 'I feel confident about myself.'
- Self-awareness. The self-awareness scale contains six items. This scale measures a person's recognition and understanding of his or her feelings and ideas (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 2003). An example of an item on this scale is 'I understand my feelings well.'
- Decision making and problem solving. The decision making and problem solving scale contains eleven
  items. This scale measures a person's ability to recognize problems and causes, to assess and solve
  problems, and to think about consequences of one's actions before making decisions (Erawan, 2010;
  WHO, 2003). An example of an item on this scale is 'I always look for various solutions to solve a
  problem.'
- Social responsibility. The social responsibility scale consists of six items and measures the extent to
  which a person sees himself as a part of the society and taking responsibility (Erawan, 2010; WHO,
  2003). An example of an item on this scale is 'I am aware that my actions can have negative
  consequences for others.'
- Critical thinking. The critical thinking scale contains five items and measures a person's ability to analyze problems and causes and effects in order to explain and solve problems (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 2003). An example of an item on this scale is 'I look at information from various perspectives.'
- Creative thinking. The creative thinking scale consists of five items. This scale measures a person's ability to think in various ways and to come up with new ideas and carry them out (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 2003). An example of an item on this scale is 'I like doing things I have never done before.'
- Interpersonal relationships. The interpersonal relationships scale contains five items. This scale measures a person's ability to interact and communicate with others (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 2003). An example of an item on this scale is 'I get along with everyone.'
- Empathy. The empathy scale consists of eight items, measuring ability to understand other people's feeling and to empathize with others, regardless of perceived differences in terms of ethnicity, sex, age, education level, religion, etc (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 2003). An example of an item on this scale is 'I like helping others, even when I don't get anything out of it.'
- Self-management. The self-management scale contains five items and measures a person's ability to
  cope with stress during daily activities and to control one's emotions during stressful situations (Erawan,
  2010; WHO, 2003). An example of an item on this scale is 'When I get angry I am able to behave
  myself in a decent way.'

All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 3 (in between) and 5 (totally true). Various items on the scales were reverse-scored, meaning that a higher score represents a negative outcome. Item from the self-esteem scale (3 items) and interpersonal relationships scale (3 items) had to be recoded during analyses. For all scales, a higher score represents a higher level of functioning.

#### 3.4. Statistical analyses

A confirmatory factor analysis was carried out in SPSS Amos 20 (Arbuckle, 2011) to examine construct validity of the separate life skills scales. Both the model's Chi-Square and fit-indices, the latter of which are non-sensitive to sample size (CFI, TLI, and RMSEA $^{\dagger}$ ) were used to evaluate model fit. The following fit index cut-off values are indicative of good model fit: NFI > .90; CFI > .90, TLI > .90, and RMSEA < .05 (Kline, 2005). RMSEA < .07 indicates an acceptable fit to the data. A non-significant Chi-Square indicates exact model fit, a ratio between the x2 statistic and the degrees of freedom (df) that is lower than 2.5 indicates a close fit to the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999). To account for non-independence and non-normality, the robust maximum likelihood estimation procedure (MLR)

T CFI (Comparative Fit Index), TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index), NFI (Normed Fit Index) and RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) are indices of goodness of fit that are independent of sample size. Models that fit well score favourably on these fit-indices. For further references see Arbuckle (2011).

was chosen (Muthén & Muthén, 1998). A modification index, giving the expected drop in Chi-Square if a parameter in question is freely estimated, was used to improve model fit. Further improvement of model fit was achieved by removing items that did not load significantly on their respective factors.

T-Tests were used to assess differences in scores on separate life skill scales between mothers and fathers, parents above and below 40 years of age and parents with a lower and higher education level.

#### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Construct Validity and Reliability

Results (Table 1) of the confirmatory factor analyses for the separate scales indicated a good fit to the data for the scales 'Self-awareness', 'Decision making and problem solving', 'Interpersonal relationships', 'Critical thinking', 'Self-management' and 'Self-esteem' (RMSEA < .03). Results indicated an adequate fit to the data for the scales 'Social responsibility', 'Empathy', and 'Creative thinking' (RMSEA < .06). Chi-square and other fit indices of all separate scales are depicted in table 1. The scales of the LSQ were found to be internally consistent. Reliability coefficients were satisfactory for the scales Critical thinking ( $\alpha$  = .69), Social responsibility ( $\alpha$  = .68), Interpersonal relationships ( $\alpha$  = .68), Decision making ( $\alpha$  = .71), Self-awareness ( $\alpha$  = .70), Creative thinking ( $\alpha$  = .68). Reliability coefficients were good for Empathy ( $\alpha$  = .82) and Self-esteem ( $\alpha$  = .85).

#### 4.2. Score differences between groups

T-test results revealed a significant difference in scores on the self-esteem scale between parents older than 40 years (M = 3.920, SD = .482) and parents younger than 40 years (M = 3.715, SD = .543); t(129) = 2.284, p = .024. Also, a significant difference was found in self-management scores between parents older than 40 years (M = 3.831, SD = .399) and parents younger than 40 years (M = 3.659, SD = .459); t(129) = 2.298, p = .023. These results suggest that aging does have an effect on self-esteem and self-management. Specifically, our results suggest that when parents become older, their self-esteem and self-management increases.

Furthermore, a significant difference was also found between self-esteem scores for fathers (M = 4.021, SD = .555) and mothers (M = 3.781, SD = .499); t(131) = 2.088, p = .039. A significant difference was also found between social responsibility scores for fathers (M = 3.618, SD = .599) and mothers (M = 3.873, SD = .451); t(131) = -2.356, p = .020. These results suggest that gender does have an effect on self-esteem and social responsibility. Specifically, our results suggest that fathers have a higher self-esteem and social responsibility.

Additionally, T-tests showed significant differences in scores on critical thinking between higher educated parents (M = 3.937, SD = .427) and lower educated parents (M = 3.729, SD = .437); t(128) = 2.357, p = .020. Also, significant differences were found for social responsibility scores between higher educated parents (M = 3.904, SD = .483) and lower educated parents (M = 3.613, SD = .438); t(128) = 2.991, p = .003. Results also showed a significant difference between self-awareness scores between higher educated parents (M = 4.008, SD = .349) and lower educated parents (M = 3.817, SD = .337); t(128) = 2.686, p = .008. Finally, significant differences were found in scores on self-management between higher educated parents (M = 3.792, SD = .421) and lower educated parents (M = 3.613, SD = .465); t(128) = 2.016, p = .046. These results suggest that education does have an effect on self-awareness, critical thinking and self-management. Specifically, our results suggest that when parents have a higher level of education, their self-awareness, critical thinking and self-management increases.

## 5. Discussion

Studies show life skills in parents have a positive effect on parents' well-being and the life skills and development of their children (Gravesteijn & Petterson, 2014; McElwain, et al., 2007; McKeown et al., 2003; Sameroff, 2009; WHO, 2003; Small, 1988). The aim of this study was to explore whether life skills as defined by the World Health Organization (2003) can be measured in a select amount of parents. This study is a first attempt at developing a measure for the life skills in parents by examining the construct validity and internal consistency reliability by means of confirmatory factor analysis and reliability analyses of the LSQ-P. In doing so, a version of a life skills

questionnaire for parents was constructed. The LSQ-P is conceptually substantiated and was first tested in a select amount of parents (Erawan, 2010; WHO, 2003).

Evidence for construct validity of the life skills scales was found in confirmatory factor analyses. Evidence for good internal consistency reliabilities was found in reliability analysis. The results show that the nine scales derived from Erawan (2010) measuring various life skills are an adequate to good fit to the data as gathered from the selection of parents. This result indicates life skills can, indeed, be measured in a select amount of parents. Furthermore, this study shows differences in scores on separate life skill scales between mothers and fathers, parents above and below 40 years of age and parents with a lower and higher education level. Fathers had a higher score on the self- esteem and social responsibility scale. In general men show higher self-esteem than women (Orth, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2010). Apparently this is also the case with fathers compared to mothers. Parents above 40 years of age scored higher on self-management and self-esteem compared to parents below 40 years of age. This corresponds with literature in which a higher self-esteem in individuals of middle-age was found, compared to individuals of a younger age (Orth, et al., 2010). A study on self-management of parents suggests continued opportunities for modifications to regulatory functioning. This regulatory functioning is shaped by changes in the physical and social environment, and by life experience and evolvement accumulated with increasing age (Rutherford, et al. 2015). This implicates that parents' self-management is also shaped by these factors. Therefore, we suggest that older parents have stronger self-management than younger parents. Additionally, older parents have more and older children, implying that development and demands in parenthood also shapes parents' regulatory functioning. This study indicates that parents use critical thinking, self-management and self-awareness during their parenthood. Higher educated parents scored higher on these skills. It is not clear whether these parents acquired these skills during their higher education, or they had higher education because they possessed these skills.

The present study has a few limitations. Firstly, the selection of parents in this study consists mostly of mothers and higher educated parents. This could possibly impede generalization of the results to fathers and lower educated parents. Secondly, this preliminary study investigated the usefulness of the questionnaire, however, the selection was small and may have influenced the reliability and validity of this questionnaire negatively. Also, items of the original questionnaire (Erawan, 2010) have been removed that did not load significantly on their respective factors. This could possibly influence the construct validity negatively.

Although further research is needed, an important implication for the field of social work and other professionals who work with parents, is that the LSQ-P can be used to assess whether parents have sufficiently developed the separate life skills. This opens up opportunities for researchers and child- and family workers to routinely monitor life skills in parents and strengthen these life skills through interventions. On account of ample research which shows life skills in parents have a positive effect on parents' well-being as well as the life skills and development of their children, we implicate that supporting parents to sufficiently develop their life skills will strengthen their parenthood, and ultimately their families (Gravesteijn & Petterson, 2014; McElwain, et al., 2007; McKeown et al., 2003; Sameroff, 2009; WHO, 2003; Small, 1988).

Future research should investigate the convergent and concurrent validity of the life skills scales in a larger selection of parents. This means another validated instrument or scales measuring skills of parents need to be used to explore if they measure the same construct. Also, in order to obtain more robust evidence for the present findings, a confirmative factor analysis needs to be replicated in a larger study. Furthermore, this study shows some parents have developed their life skills more than others and give cause for further research among a larger sample to explore the differences between groups. In a larger sample it can be interesting to explore differences between parents with one or with more children, parents of children in different development stages and parents compared to non-parents. In sum, studies show life skills of parents contribute to the well-being and development of their children. This study shows separate life skills can be measured with a selection of parents. Therefore, professionals need to determine whether parents have sufficiently developed their life skills and invest in these insufficiently developed life skills, to contribute to the strengthening of parenthood and the well-being and development of children (McElwain, et al., 2007; McKeown et al., 2003; Sameroff, 2009; WHO, 2003; Small, 1988).

Appendix A. Descriptive statistics and results of confirmatory factor analysis of the separate scales of the Life Skills Questionnaire

Table 1

Scale	М	SD	$x^2$	Df	p	$x^2 df$	NFI	CFI	TLI	RMSE
										$\boldsymbol{A}$
Self-awareness	3.964	.350	7.803	7	.350	1.115	.954	.995	.989	.029
Decision Making and	3.882	.319	32.735	38	.711	.861	.901	1.000	1.028	.000
Problem Solving			32.733	36	./11	.001	.901	1.000	1.026	.000
Interpersonal	3.862	.507	4.576	4	.334	1.144	.972	.996	.991	.033
Relationships			4.570	4	.554	1.144	.912	.990		.033
Social responsibility	3.827	.488	11.623	8	.169	1.453	.900	.964	.933	.059
Critical thinking	3.890	.441	6.116	5	.295	1.223	.941	.988	.976	.028
Empathy	4.399	.373	20.035	15	.171	1.336	.899	.989	.979	.050
Self-esteem	3.824	.516	3.314	5	.652	.663	.984	1.000	.017	.000
Creative thinking	3.717	.455	1.680	2	.432	.840	.989	1.000	1.011	.051
Self-management	3.749	.433	1.412	2	.494	.706	.988	1.000	1.027	.000

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