



Editorial

Exploring the foundations and functions of adolescent thriving within the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development: A view of the issues ☆

Richard M. Lerner ^{a,*}, Alexander von Eye ^b, Jacqueline V. Lerner ^c, Selva Lewin-Bizan ^a^a Tufts University, United States^b Michigan State University, United States^c Boston College, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 22 August 2009

Keywords:

Positive Youth Development
 4-H Study
 Developmental systems theory
 Developmental assets
 Developmental regulations
 Plasticity

ABSTRACT

We introduce this special issue on the foundations and functions of adolescent thriving by summarizing the developmental systems theory-based, positive youth development (PYD) perspective that frames much of contemporary research about health and positive development across the adolescent period and that, more specifically, frames the 4-H Study of PYD, the data set from which the empirical work in this special issue is drawn. We discuss the different ways in which the articles in this special issue elucidate different facets of the PYD perspective and summarize the implications of this research for future scholarship and for applications aimed at improving the life chances of diverse adolescents.

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Contemporary developmental science explores the conceptual, methodological, policy, and empirical bases of understanding and applying research to improve human development across the life span (Lerner, 2006). The cutting-edge conceptual frame for such scholarship involves developmental systems theoretical models, conceptions that seek to describe, explain, and optimize mutually influential relations (termed “developmental regulations”; Brandtstädter, 2006) that exist between the developing individual and his or her complex and changing context, represented as individual \leftrightarrow context relations (Lerner, 2002).

Within the study of the adolescent portion of the life span, this interest in applying developmental science to optimize behavior and development has involved the positive youth development (PYD) perspective (Damon, 2004). Derived from developmental systems ideas, the core idea within the PYD perspective is that all adolescents have strengths, for instance, by virtue of the plasticity (i.e., the potential for systematic change in structure or function across ontogeny) that exists within the developmental system. Thus, every adolescent has the potential to change the course of his or her own development. According to the PYD perspective, there are also strengths that exist in the ecology of youth; that is, there are resources in families, schools, neighborhoods, and structured, out-of-school-time (OST) activities that can support the actualization of adolescent change in more positive directions. These contextual resources are termed “ecological developmental assets” (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Semsal, 2006). Predicated on the assumption that all youth have characteristics of individual and social structure and function that can be enhanced, the key hypothesis within the PYD perspective is that, if the strengths of youth are aligned across adolescence with ecological developmental assets, then every young person's development can be improved (Lerner, 2005, 2009; Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009).

☆ The writing of this and the following articles in this special issue was supported in part by a grant from the National 4-H Council made possible by funds provided by Philip Morris USA, an Altria Company. We are grateful to Erin Phelps, Pamela Anderson, Edmond Bowers, Michelle Boyd, Aerika Brittan, Kristen Fay, Heidi Johnson, Megan Kiely, Alicia Doyle Lynch, Christopher Napolitano, Kristina Schmid, and Amy E. A. Warren for their invaluable contributions to the research reported in this special issue, and to Leslie Dickinson, for her masterful editorial skills.

* Corresponding author. Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development, 305 Lincoln Filene, Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155, United States.
 E-mail address: richard.lerner@tufts.edu (R.M. Lerner).

This special issue – which focuses on reporting current research derived from a large, national, longitudinal data set, the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD) – presents major empirical examples of the usefulness of the developmental systems theory-based PYD perspective. The perspective stands as a conceptual alternative to the long-held deficit models of this developmental period (Lerner, 2009; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009) and, as such, provides a rationale for how this strength-based conception of youth may provide, on the one hand, a revised research agenda for research about adolescent development and, on the other hand, a different focus for policies and programs aimed at enhancing the life chances of diverse young people.

Instead of searching for the conditions that may decrease problem behaviors or prevent problems from occurring, the PYD perspective broadens the scope of research to include an assessment of the individual \leftrightarrow context relations that promote thriving across adolescence and that, as well, may have a preventive effect. In addition, the PYD perspective changes the focus of applications to policies and programs. From this perspective, thriving in adolescence is not seen as the absence of problems (i.e., thriving is not conceived as the absence of bullying, drinking, unsafe sex, school failure, or substance abuse, etc.). Instead, thriving is seen as the growth of attributes that mark a flourishing, healthy young person, e.g., the characteristics termed the “Five Cs” of PYD – competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003) and youth contributions to self, family, community, and civil society (Lerner, Alberts, & Bobek, 2007; Lerner et al., 2005).

Accordingly, the PYD perspective suggests that policies should be directed not only to problem reduction or prevention but, as well, to fostering conditions that promote such attributes of thriving. At the same time, the perspective suggests that practitioners should identify the actions needed to provide youth with the individual \leftrightarrow context relations that place them on a thriving trajectory across adolescence. These actions involve positive and sustained adult–youth relations, life skills building opportunities, and opportunities for youth participation in, and leadership of, valued family, school, and community activities (i.e., actions that are termed by Lerner, 2004, as the “Big 3” attributes of effective youth-serving programs).

The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD)

The several articles in this special issue provide evidence about the empirical usefulness of the PYD perspective and discuss how – in the areas of youth development of concern within a given article – research testing the PYD perspective does have new and important implications for both adolescent development research and for the application of developmental science. All articles within this special issue draw on data derived from the 4-H Study data set.

The 4-H Study was designed to test the idea that when the strengths of youth are aligned across adolescence with family, school, and community resources (and, in particular, resources provided by community-based, out-of-school time youth development programs, such as 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, YMCA, and scouting), positive youth development (operationalized by the Five Cs of Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection, and Caring) and, as well, youth community Contributions (the “sixth C” of PYD) will occur (Lerner, 2004, 2007; Lerner et al., 2005). Beginning in 2002, with the collection of data from about 1,700 fifth grade youth and about 1,100 of their parents, the 4-H study, which employs a version of a cohort sequential longitudinal design (Lerner et al., 2005), has grown to more than 6,000 youth and more than 3,000 of their parents from 41 states. At this writing, the study is launching its eighth wave of data collection, which assesses youth in Grade 12.

Although all of the contributions to the special issue use the 4-H data set, the authors come from across the United States, Europe, and Asia. These researchers are using the 4-H Study data set to link facets of adolescent development to issues of applied significance for young people and their family, school, and community settings. Whether studying youth civic engagement and community contributions, out-of-school-time activities of youth, adolescent participation in youth development programs, internalizing or externalizing problems in adolescence, academic achievement, or school bullying, all papers in the special issue focus on the relations between developmental processes, involving mutually influential relations between individuals and their contexts, and issues of applied significance. The contributions to the special issue bring together a multidisciplinary group of scholars (e.g., from developmental science, education, and medicine), and from multiple university or community-based organizations, both in the U.S. and internationally.

The special issue: An overview

Using data from Grades 5 to 7 of the 4-H Study, Phelps et al. (2009–this issue) assessed the structure and development of PYD. Building on Grade 5 4-H Study findings, that the “Five Cs” (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring) could be empirically defined as latent constructs converging on a second-order construct, labeled PYD, the authors used structural models to assess the fit of this original model for Grades 5, 6, and 7. Results indicated that PYD continued to be a robust construct that can be defined comparably for Grades 6 and 7, as it was in Grade 5.

Phelps, et al. discuss implications for future research and for applications of the finding that, across the three years of early adolescence that were assessed (about ages 10 to 12), there is continuity in the structure of PYD. For example, using this index of PYD, future research will be able to employ a developmentally equivalent index of thriving to study the role of individual and contextual developmental assets in promoting PYD across the early years of adolescence. In turn, the indices of the Five Cs and of the overall measure of PYD provide parents, teachers, and youth development program leaders with a developmentally-sensitive means to measure PYD among young adolescents or to evaluate the role of youth-serving programs in fostering thriving across the early adolescent years.

In turn, Gestsdóttir, Lewin-Bizan, von Eye, Lerner, and Lerner (2009–this issue) assessed the structure and function of selection, optimization, and compensation in middle adolescence. They noted that intentional self-regulation is a core facet of human

functioning, involving people's modulation of their thoughts, attention, emotions, and behaviors to react to environmental demands and to influence their own development. Using data from Grades 8, 9, and 10 of the 4-H Study, the structure of intentional self-regulation, as indexed by a measure derived from the Freund and Baltes (2002) model of Selection (S), Optimization (O), and Compensation (C), or SOC, was assessed. Within-and-across-time links between SOC scores and indicators of PYD, and risk/problem behaviors were ascertained. A tripartite structure of intentional self-regulation was identified across all three grades, and SOC scores at all times positively covaried with PYD and negatively with risk/problem behaviors. Findings were strongest for overall SOC scores and for the components of "O" and "C."

These findings have implications for youth development programs. First, a differentiated goal structure among youth in Grades 8 through 10, especially a clearly formed Compensation factor, suggests that youth programs that want to support the thriving of youth need to attend to a more complex life-management structure than was the case in the earlier portion of adolescence. Gestsdóttir et al. (2009-this issue) also suggest that practitioners should not only differentiate among S, O, and C skills in middle adolescence, but, in programs aimed at promoting thriving, emphasis on "O" and "C" skills may be more important than a focus on "S." Not only by supporting youth in setting realistic, potentially achievable goals, but also by focusing their efforts on helping young people locate the resources (internal and external) they need to achieve their goals, and on not "giving up" in the face of failure or of blocked goals, youth program leaders may be better able promote thriving among youth.

Urban, Lewin-Bizan, and Lerner (2009-this issue) assessed the role of neighborhood ecological assets and activity involvement in youth developmental outcomes, and focused on the differential impacts of asset poor and asset rich neighborhoods. These authors noted that developmental systems theories recognize that many factors contribute to adolescent development including individual factors, family factors, and the neighborhood environment, including extracurricular activities. These activities provide a context for youth development, and participation has been linked with positive developmental outcomes. This study used data from a subsample of early adolescents in the 4-H Study to determine whether neighborhood assets moderate the effect of adolescent activity involvement on positive and negative developmental outcomes. The relationship between activity involvement and neighborhood assets was different for girls as compared to boys when assessing outcomes of positive youth development, risk behavior, and depression.

Urban, et al. concluded that additional research is needed to understand the underlying mechanisms that drive these differences. In turn, the most successful youth programs are likely to be those that consider the goodness-of-fit between the individual youth and the context in which that youth is embedded. Consistent with a developmental systems perspective, the Urban, et al. findings underscore the need for researchers and practitioners to consider multiple contextual influences when seeking to understand or to promote, respectively, positive youth development. Accordingly, practitioners may need to collaborate across programs in order to maximize the opportunities to promote thriving.

Using data from 8th grade participants in the 4-H Study, Bobek, Zaff, Li, and Lerner (2009-this issue) assessed links among youth development organizations, civic identity, and civic engagement. They used factor analytic procedures to refine a four-component model of civic participation (social capital/social trust, pro-civic attitudes, civic knowledge and skills, and civic engagement) into six factors (civic duty, civic skills, civic participation, adult social connection, peer social connection, and neighborhood social connection) and an overall score for a civic identity/civic engagement (CICE) measure. Bobek, et al. report that participation in 4-H programs was significantly related to scores on the majority of the six factors and, as well, to the overall CICE score.

Bobek et al. note that their findings indicate that youth civic participation has cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components and that these facets of youth CICE may show differential patterns of development. As such, the authors suggest that youth-program practitioners seeking to enhance civic participation should assess these multiple facets of CICE and develop distinct curricular for fostering these three components of civic participation.

Using data from the first three waves (Grades 5, 6, and 7) of the 4-H Study, Ma, Phelps, Lerner, and Lerner (2009-this issue) examined whether being a bully or a victim of bullying is related to an adolescent's academic competence, and if selected contextual and individual variables moderate any relation between academic competence and bullying. The results of random coefficient OLS hierarchical regression analyses indicated that being a bully predicted lower grades across time, and that being a bully was more detrimental for girls than for boys. Being a bully and being a victim negatively predicted self-perceived academic competence, but these predictive effects did not change over time or differ by sex. Teacher support positively predicted grades and greater parent support and teacher support independently predicted higher self-perceived academic competence. Greater educational expectations and school engagement independently predicted higher self-reported grades, while these two predictors positively interacted in explaining self-perceived academic competence. Unexpectedly, peer support negatively predicted self-reported grades for victims, and negatively predicted self-perceived academic competence for bullies.

Ma, et al. argue out that comparing the developmental trajectories of academic competence among different clusters of adolescents would provide more nuanced information about how bullying impacts adolescents' academic development. They note that their findings provide useful information about potential entry points for school bullying intervention programs that aim to enhance academic competence for bullies and victims. The authors discuss the importance of addressing the issue of academic competence in bullying interventions, as well, as need for youth-serving professionals to capitalize on developmental assets in promoting academic competence among adolescents who bully and who are bullied.

Conclusions

The articles in this special issue provide support for the use the development systems theory-based, positive youth development (PYD) perspective in framing research that enhances understanding of the intricacies of the individual ↔ context

relations that put young people on a thriving journey across the adolescent period. In addition, all articles explain how the findings of the research derived from the 4-H Study of PYD have important implications for the conduct of youth development programs and for the formulation of policies that seek to promote thriving among adolescents and not only prevent or ameliorate problems among members of this age group.

In underscoring the vital connection between research and application, the articles in this special issue pertain to another, larger point associated with the positive youth development perspective. The potential to change youth development for the better – a potential illustrated by the findings reported in this special issue – are a reason for all people concerned with the health and welfare of adolescents to be optimistic that evidence-based actions can be taken to enhance the chances for thriving among all young people. Indeed, because parents, peers, teachers, and community leaders are key parts of the ecology of youth development that is essential for putting youth on a path to thriving, the broadest implication of the research reported in this special issue is that every person has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the positive development of youth. All of us, then, may be invaluable assets in promoting thriving among the diverse youth of our nation and world.

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