

Positive Youth Development: Thriving as the Basis of Personhood and Civil Society

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Theoretical issues pertinent to a dynamic, developmental systems understanding of positive youth development and the thriving process in such development are discussed. Thriving involves relative plasticity in human development and adaptive regulations of person–context relations. An integrated moral and civic identity and a commitment to society beyond the limits of one’s own existence enable thriving youth to be agents both in their own, healthy development and in the positive enhancement of other people and of society. Thriving youth become generative adults through the progressive enhancement of behaviors that are valued in their specific culture and that reflect the universal structural value of contributing to civil society.

In these early years of the 21st century a new vision and vocabulary for discussing America’s young people has emerged. Propelled by the increasingly more collaborative contributions of scholars (e.g., Benson, 2003; Damon & Gregory, 2003; Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998), practitioners (e.g., Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001; Wheeler, 2000), and policymakers (e.g., Gore, 2003; Gore & Gore, 2002), youth are viewed as resources to be developed. The new vocabulary emphasizes the strengths present within all young people and involves concepts such as developmental assets (Benson, 2003), positive youth development (Benson, 1990; Little, 1993), moral development (Damon, 1990), civic engagement (e.g., Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Youniss, McClellan, & Yates, 1999), well-being (Bornstein et al., 2003), and thriving (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). All concepts are predicated on the ideas that every young person has the potential for successful, healthy development and that all youth possess the capacity for positive development.

This vision for and vocabulary about youth has evolved over the course of a scientifically arduous path (Lerner et al., 2002). Complicating any new conceptualization of the character of youth as resources for the positive development of self, families, and communities was an antithetical theoretical

approach to the nature and development of young people, one characterized by a deficit view of youth that conceptualizes their behaviors as deviations from normative development (see Hall, 1904). Understanding such deviations was not seen as being of direct relevance to scholarship aimed at discovering the principles of basic developmental processes. Accordingly, the characteristics of youth were regarded as issues of “only” applied concern—and thus of secondary scientific interest. Not only did this model separate basic science from application but, as well, it disembedded the adolescent from the study of normal or healthy development. In short, the deficit view of youth as problems to be managed split the study of young people from the study of health and positive development (Lerner et al., 2002; Overton, 1998).

Other types of “splits” were associated with this deficit model of youth development. The conception of developmental process typically associated with this model often involved causal splits between individual and context, between organism and environment, or—most generally—between nature and nurture (Gottlieb, 1997; Lerner, 2002; Overton, 1998). In short, scholars studying human development, in general, and youth development in particular, used a theoretical model that was not useful in understanding the relational nature of development (Overton, 1998), the synthesis between basic and applied science, or how young people developed in normative, healthy, or positive ways. However, the integration of person and context, of basic and applied scholarship, and of young people with the potential for positive development were legitimated by the relational models of de-

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velopment that emerged as cutting-edge scholarship by the end of the 20th century (Damon, 1998).

Developmental Systems, Relative Plasticity, and the Regulation of Person–Context Relations

The forefront of contemporary developmental theory and research is associated with ideas stressing that systemic (bidirectional, fused) *relations* between individuals and contexts provide the bases of human behavior and developmental change (e.g., Damon, 1998; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Gottlieb, 1997; Overton, 1998). Within the context of such theories, changes across the life span are seen as propelled by the dynamic relations between individuals and the multiple levels of the ecology of human development (e.g., families, peer groups, schools, communities, and culture), all changing interdependently across time (history; Lerner, 2002).

Temporal embeddedness means that there always exists across life the potential for change in person–context relations. There are two important concepts associated with this optimistic view of the potential to enhance human life: relative plasticity and developmental regulation. We believe these concepts frame a conceptualization of a life-span developmental process that may be labeled as “thriving.” By explicating below the nature and implications of relative plasticity and developmental regulation for the thriving process, we argue that structurally invariant (universal) bidirectional person–context relations create in individual’s development a sense of self (an identity) that integrates moral and civic actions and possesses the “virtue” of spirituality. Spirituality is an emotional orientation to self and context that involves the transcendence of self and “fuels” (motivates) the development of a commitment to contributing to others and institutions beyond self in time and place.

The content of developmental regulation may vary culturally and, as such, the functioning of identity processes and the definition of moral duty and civic contribution may vary as well. We will argue that in democratic societies such as the United States the coupling of structural invariability (or universality) and cultural specificity involves an orientation to social justice and equity (Lerner, in press; Rawls, 1971).

Implications of Plasticity for Positive Youth Development

Although the relation of individual ontogeny to history means that change is a necessary feature of human life, change in person–context relations is of course not limitless. Interlevel relations within the system both facilitate and constrain opportunities for change (e.g., change is constrained both by past developments and

by contemporary contextual conditions). As a consequence, contemporary developmental systems theories stress that *relative plasticity*—the potential for systematic change in structure or function—exists across life, although the magnitude of this plasticity may vary across ontogeny (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998; Lerner, 1984, 2002).

The presence of relative plasticity legitimates an optimistic and proactive search for characteristics of individuals and of their ecologies that, together, can be arrayed to promote positive developmental change (Lerner, 2002). The developmental systems stress on relative plasticity provides a foundation for an applied developmental science (ADS) aimed at enhancing human development through strengthening adaptive developmental regulation, that is, interrelations between an individual and his or her context that maintain and perpetuate healthy, positive functioning for all facets of the relationship (the system). From this perspective, healthy development involves positive changes in the relation between a developing person—who is committed and able to contribute (i.e., to function, to effectively act) positively (in culturally defined ways) to self, family, and community—and a community supporting the development of such citizens.

A young person may be said to be *thriving*, then, if he or she is involved across time in such healthy, positive relations with his or her community and on the path to what Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1998) described as “idealized personhood” (an adult status marked by making culturally valued contributions to self, others, and institutions). Although the structure of person–context relations (of developmental regulations) remain invariant (e.g., involving bidirectionality and relative plasticity), the components of the individual-psychological and social relational features of person–context relations may show intercultural differences as they change over time to comprise the thriving process. Figure 1 illustrates the components of the person–context relations that we believe structure the thriving process among youth.

ADS and the Thriving Process

ADS efforts that promote thriving may involve enhancing the orientation of a person to contribute to healthy family life and community institutions while, at the same time, improving oneself in manners that enable such individual actions to be successful. Promotion of a sense of the importance of levels of being beyond the self, that is, a sense of spirituality (Benson, 1997) and of the importance of undertaking a role to contribute to social well-being (e.g., a moral identity, a sense of civic duty), are exemplars of such an orientation (cf. Erikson, 1959; Youniss et al., 1999). Simultaneously, such ADS work may involve furthering the institutions and systems within communities in order to

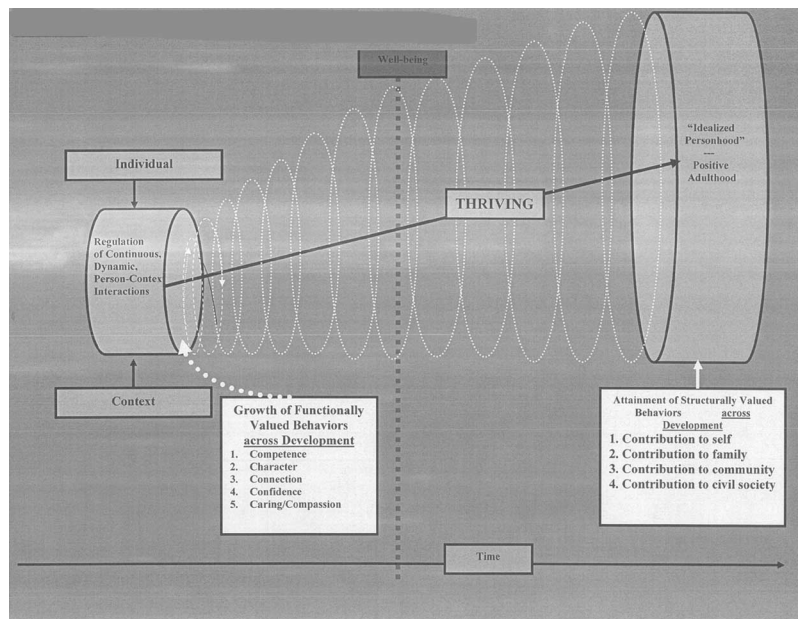


Figure 1. A developmental contextual view of the thriving process.

facilitate healthy development. Examples of such efforts within a democratic system, such as in the United States, involve providing young people with the opportunity to contribute to and take leadership positions in community efforts to improve social life and social justice and, over time, to develop their commitments to and skills at community building (Lerner, in press; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002; Zeldin, Camino, & Wheeler, 2000).

The bases for change in person–context relations, and for both plasticity and constraints in development, lie in the relations that exist among the multiple levels of organization that constitute the substance of human life (Ford & Lerner, 1992). Accordingly, ADS efforts aimed at furthering the thriving process and at fostering in young people a spiritual sense and a moral commitment to make healthy, integrated contributions to self, family, community, and civil society may involve work focused on multiple levels of organization within the developmental system. These levels range from the inner biological, through the individual–psychological and the proximal social relational (e.g., involving peers and families), to the sociocultural (including educational, public policy, governmental, and economic institutions) and the natural and designed physical ecologies of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Developmental Regulation and the Thriving Process

Within developmental systems theories, changing relations are the basic unit of analysis (Lerner, 2002; Overton, 1998). Neither individual nor context are stressed in such theories. Rather, systemic relations

are the focal analytic units. Thus, the regulation across development of these relations is of central concern in efforts directed to capitalize positively on the relative plasticity of the human developmental *system* (note, not the individual) to enhance the healthy functioning and development of both individuals and settings. In other words, within developmental systems theories adaptive developmental regulation involves mutually beneficial and sustaining exchanges between individuals and contexts.

Accordingly, ADS efforts aimed at creating and sustaining effective (healthy) person–context regulations may be directed to, on the one hand, enhancing the person’s self definition or moral sense in regard to embracing the significance of enhancing, in American society, social justice and democracy and, on the other hand, to improve the systems present within the social context to enable individual freedom and facilitate equity and opportunity across individuals. That is, we hypothesize that if the institutions of society insure democracy, social justice, and equity to all of its citizens, then there is an increased probability that individuals will be oriented to support these institutions. Wearing the “veil of ignorance” (Rawls, 1971), individuals will want to act to support a society that does not discriminate among individuals in providing the right to equal opportunity and freedom but, instead, assures liberty and justice for all.

In all cultural systems, when these respective contributions by individuals and contexts are synthesized successfully over time, there is an increased probability that thriving increases within individuals. We believe that in such circumstances there is also a growth in the institutions of civil society, in

the “space” between people and government (O’Connell, 1999). A system promoting positive human development is therefore present.

In short, a social system that protects and promotes the development of the individual will be one that individuals will seek to serve and sustain. Such a relation is the essence of the mutual person–context benefits defining adaptive developmental regulation. This regulation has fundamental biological significance.

Evolutionary Bases of Developmental Regulation

The story of human evolution is one of neoteny (i.e., slowed rates of development relative to ancestral species) and of social interdependence between individuals and groups (Gould, 1977; Johanson & Edey, 1981; Lerner, 2002). From the beginning of their existence, then, humans have been linked to a social world for their survival. The social world—the people and institutions of society—needed individuals who learned to be committed to protecting, contributing to, and perpetuating the group. The individual needed the group—society—to provide a supportive context assuring both survival and the opportunity to develop the physical, mental, and behavioral characteristics requisite for making a mature contribution to self and society (Lerner, 2002).

Individual and societal interests and needs have been inextricably integrated, then, across the course of human evolution (phylogeny). The story of healthy human development from birth to maturity (ontogeny) is one of understanding how the relation between an individual’s actions on the context and the context’s actions on the individual occur or may be fostered in ways that promote a personhood marked by health and societal maintenance, perpetuation, and enhancement (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1998).

Structural and Functional Components of Developmental Regulation

The healthy and successful development of young people may be understood within the context of human evolution and of how adaptive regulation of person–context relations constitutes the basic process of ontogenetic change within the developmental system. We have conceptualized the *idealized* version of this ontogenetic change process as thriving. As we have explained, from the perspective of the integrated levels of organization comprising this developmental system, there are both universal, structural and cultural or society-specific functional components of a developmental linkage between the person and physi-

cal and cultural ecological context that enables thriving to occur. This ecological context is composed of other people (e.g., peer groups, families) and of the institutions of society and culture that are constituted by both physical institutions, such as schools and religious institutions, and conceptual or ideological institutions, such as the values that exist in a society in regard to the desired features of human functioning.

Within the developmental system, a relation that subserves the maintenance and perpetuation of the system is one wherein the individual acts to support the institutions of society and, simultaneously, where these institutions support the healthy and productive functioning and development of the individual (Elder, 1998; Ford & Lerner, 1992). In such a relation the actions of the individual on the context and the actions of the context on the individual are fused in the production of healthy outcomes for both the individual and the institutions (Elder, 1998).

As such, the key feature of the thriving process is one wherein the regulation of person–context relations eventuates in such multilevel outcomes (Brandstädter, 1998; Heckhausen, 1999). In fact, a key, structural value of all societies (i.e., a universal structural value of all societies) is that individuals’ regulation of their person–context relations makes positive contributions to self, family, community, and society (Elder, 1998). In short, then, in all societies healthy and valued personhood is seen as a period, or “stage,” wherein such generative regulation exists (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1998; Erikson, 1959).

We have noted that, of course, in different societies there is variation in what a person must do to manifest such structural values of productive and healthy personhood. That is, how a person must function to manifest structurally valued regulation will vary from social–cultural setting to setting and across historical (and ecological) conditions (Elder, Modell, & Parke, 1993; Erikson, 1959). That is, functional values show social, cultural, and temporal variation. For example, in some societies regulations that support interindividually invariant belief in or obedience to religious dictums may be of superordinate value. In turn, in the United States regulations that support individual freedom, equity, and democracy are highly valued, and attributes such as the “Five Cs” of positive youth development—competence, confidence, character, social connection, and caring or compassion (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Roth, et al., 1998)—are often regarded as healthy outcomes of functionally appropriate (adaptive) developmental regulations. In turn, attributes antithetical to these five attributes (e.g., attributes such as negative self regard, abusive or manipulative social relationships, “zero-sum-game” self interest, and the absence of integrity) are instances of unfavorable individual out-

comes that (we presume) derive from inadequate (nonadaptive) developmental regulations.

On the societal side of such dysfunctional developmental regulations, there may be political systems wherein there is a “disequilibrium” between the individual and the society such that individual actions are constrained to meet the demands of the state and individual differences (e.g., the freedom to take independent initiative) are curtailed because such functioning will decrease the probability of the state maintaining its hegemony over society. We believe that such societies (e.g., Totalitarian or Fascist ones) are instable and dysfunctional systems because they attempt to maintain person–context exchanges that are discrepant from what is required to maintain adaptive developmental regulations.

In all cases, however, each society will show variation within a given historical moment in what behaviors are judged as valuable in (consistent with) supporting the universal structural value of maintaining and perpetuating person–context regulations subserving mutually beneficial individual and institutional relations (Elder et al., 1993). As a consequence, the markers or indexes of what an individual must manifest as he or she develops from infancy to adult personhood may vary across place and time (Elder et al., 1993). Accordingly, there may be variation across different societies and points in time within the same society in definitions of person–context relations that comprise positive youth development, and thus in the specific behaviors that move a young person along a life path wherein he or she will possess the functional values of society and attain structurally valued personhood. Simply, there may be both historical and cultural variation in the specific, functionally valued components of the thriving process.

Thriving as a Marker of Healthy and Successful Developmental Regulations

The study of thriving can be linked to the Kantian concept of “practical reason,” a form of reasoning superior to “theoretical reason,” that leads people, in careful consideration of the facts of reality, to be aware of what they “ought” to do and then to do it (Kant, 1781/1966). In this view, those who adhere to practical reason will likely participate in healthy developmental regulation, contributing not only to their own healthy development but also to the perpetuation of what their culture considers to be an “ideal” society.

Whatever the specific behaviors involved in thriving at a given time or in a particular place, within developmental systems theories thriving invariantly involves the manifestation by a young person of a systematic enhancement across ontogeny of behaviors that function to enhance developmental regula-

tion. This invariance exists because of the linkage between such growth and the attainment in adulthood of structurally valued behaviors, that is, of the behaviors that maintain, perpetuate, and enhance self and context. As such, thriving is a developmental concept that denotes a healthy change process linking youth with an adulthood status enabling society to be populated by healthy individuals oriented to integratively serve self and civil society.

The “Sample Case” of American Society

In essence, then, adaptive developmental regulation results in the emergence among young people of an orientation to transcend self-interest and place value on, and commitments to, actions supportive of their social system, which, in the American context, involves actions that promote equity, democracy, social justice, and personal freedoms (Lerner, in press). This regulatory system enables the individual and individual initiative to prosper. As such, it is this relation—between an individual engaged in support of a democratic system that, in turn, supports the individual—that is the essence of the mutual, person–context benefits defining healthy developmental regulation.

In democracies, and as illustrated in Figure 1, adaptive developmental regulation creates in youth behaviors valuable for positive person–context functioning, behaviors such as the “Five Cs” noted earlier (Lerner et al., 2000; Roth et al., 1998). As a result of such positive youth development, young people develop an orientation to contribute to their community. The development of such functionally valued behaviors in young people, as well as the development of an understanding of, and a commitment to, entities that transcend self and self-interest, result in contemporary American society in the emergence in youth of an orientation to contribute to their community, which is a “sixth C” of positive youth development (Little, 1993; Sherrod et al., 2002; Youniss et al., 1999).

A commitment to contribution rests on defining behavior in support of mutually beneficial person–context exchanges as morally necessary. Individuals’ moral duty to contribute exists because, as citizens receiving benefits from a social system supporting their individual functioning, it is necessary to be actively engaged in, at least, maintaining and, ideally, enhancing that social system (Youniss et al., 1999).

Thriving and Spiritual Development

The sense of transcendence of self and of rejecting zero-sum-game self-interest that accrues as integrated moral and civic self-definitions (identities) develop

may be interpreted as a growing spiritual sense (Benson, 1997). Erikson (1959) discussed the emotional “virtues” that were coupled with successful resolution of each of the eight psychosocial crises he included in his theory of ego development. He specified that fidelity, defined as unflagging commitment to abstract ideas (e.g., ideologies) beyond the self, was the virtue associated with adaptive resolution of the identity crisis of adolescence, and thus with the attainment of a socially prescribed, positive role (cf. Youniss et al., 1999). Commitment to a role was regarded by Erikson as a means for the behaviors of youth to serve the maintenance and perpetuation of society; fidelity to the ideology coupled with the role meant that the young person would gain emotional satisfaction—which, to Erikson meant enhanced self-esteem—through contributing to society by the enactment of role behaviors (Lerner, 2002).

One need not focus only on crisis resolution to suggest that behaviors attained during adolescence in the service of identity development may be coupled with an ideological “virtue,” that is, with a sensibility about the meaningfulness of abstract ideas that transcend the self (Youniss et al., 1999). From a perspective that focuses on adaptive developmental regulation within the developmental system, it is possible to suggest that spirituality is a transcendent virtue that emerges with the behaviors (roles) that are predicated on the development of an integrated moral and civic identity.

Contemporary researchers (e.g., Youniss et al., 1999) increasingly frame questions about the impact of service activity on the healthy identity development of youth. Erikson (1959) proposed that, when young people identify with ideologies and histories of faith-based institutions, identities can be placed within a social–historical framework that connect youth to traditions and communities that transcend the immediate moment, thereby providing young people with a sense of continuity and coherence with the past, present, and future.

Consistent with Erikson’s prescription, youth-service programs sponsored by faith-based institutions such as the Catholic Church are embedded in interpretive values and historical meaning. For example, a parish that sponsors a highway cleanup activity for its youth will likely rely on a moral and value-laden framework to explain its involvement, describing that involvement in religious traditions and stories (Youniss et al., 1999). Youth who take part in service activities are likely to “reflect on these justifications as potential meanings for their (own) actions. These established meanings, with their historical richness and picturing of an ideal future may readily be seen as nourishment for youths’ identity development” (Youniss et al., 1999, p. 244).

As such, youth whose exchanges with their contexts (whose developmental regulations) are marked by

functionally valued behaviors should develop integrated moral and civic identities and a transcendent, or spiritual, sensibility (Benson, 1997; Youniss et al., 1999). Such development puts them on a path to become adult citizens making culturally specific, generative contributions to self, family, community, and civil society. Youth producing these valued behaviors are manifesting what we have specified is the essence of the thriving process. There is evidence that, among youth, there are marked increases in spirituality, although not in commitments to organized religious institutions (Benson, 1997). These data suggest that individual identity development, reflecting a moral and civic engagement or commitment to society, is fused with spiritual development in adolescence (Youniss et al., 1999).

Indexing the Thriving Process Among Youth

As illustrated in Figure 1, at any point in time youth may show a unitemporal pattern of covariation among indexes of socially valued behaviors. In such a case the young person may be said to be in a state of well-being (Lerner, Bornstein, & Smith, 2003). For example, cross-sectionally, well-being that is indexed by variables pertinent to the Five Cs, by the “sixth C” (contribution), or by some integration of these concepts, should covary with indexes of successful person–context regulation (e.g., as represented by measures of selection, optimization, and compensation, or “SOC”; Freund, Li, & Baltes, 1999).

Because thriving is a process concept, longitudinal analyses are needed to adequately appraise whether there is evidence that patterns of covariation exist over time in a manner that reflects the growth of person–context relations promoting individual health and civil society. From a developmental systems perspective, a youth that is thriving is engaged in person–context regulatory processes that will eventuate in healthy and productive adult personhood (Lerner, 2002; Lerner et al., 2000, 2002).

Thriving may be indexed, therefore, by developmental changes indicative of integrated, positive changes in the mental and behavioral life of a young person. Mentally, there should be evidence of a growing moral and civic identity and of the “virtue” of spirituality that, with such identity development, accompanies commitment to a concern with existence that transcends the self. Behaviorally, thriving may be indexed by better (healthier, more positive) performance in regard to the functional values of society and by enhanced regulatory actions. Such actions constitute performance consistent with structural values or, in other words, with person–context interactions that link the person positively to the institutions of civil society.

If thriving is developing in this manner, then across the developmental system there should be changes in the contextual resources for such development, especially because thriving youth are civically engaged youth who are morally committed to enhancing these resources. Thriving youth epitomize the idea, found in the developmental contextual version of developmental systems theory (Lerner, 2002), that individuals are producers of their own development. Of course, individuals also serve as sources of their own development when they fail to thrive, when they engage in developmental regulations that are not mutually beneficial to self and context, and when therefore the sort of negative outcomes of unbalanced person–context exchanges that we have noted earlier are likely to occur. To prevent such dysfunctional outcomes, we believe that policies and programs that promote mutually beneficial person–context relations, and this thriving, are essential (cf. Pittman et al., 2001).

Accordingly, within a community acting to produce thriving, young people's institutional resources and actions promoting the thriving process should be evident and changing positively across time. Such contextual conditions are reflected by the individual and ecological developmental assets identified by Search Institute as key bases for thriving among youth (Benson, 2003; Scales et al., 2000). As well, these thriving-supportive conditions may be manifested by the youth–community integrations summarized by Damon and Gregory (2003), in the concept of the youth charter. Whatever the constitution of these developmental assets, because of the growing moral and civic identity of a thriving youth, a young person who is thriving will become a person contributing effectively to the maintenance and perpetuation of these very same community assets.

Thus, within a developmental systems model of the person–context regulatory processes involved in healthy youth development, and in positive and productive adult personhood, young people and their communities are involved in a bidirectional relationship wherein community assets are both products and producers of the actions of engaged young people. These young people are thriving in that they are changing in directions indicative of enhanced performance of behaviors (functions) valued in their specific society (e.g., competence, confidence, connection, etc.) and are, as a consequence, embedded in person–context regulations that reflect the structural value of contributing to civil society. Thriving youth become generative adults (Erikson, 1959). By acting on their “practical reasoning,” their sense of “ought” (Kant, 1781/1966), such adults productively build the assets of their communities and manifest the moral orientation, spirituality, and behavioral commitment to insure for themselves, their families, and their

broader social world the quality, scale, and sustainability of the institutions of social justice and civil society.

The model presented in Figure 1 provides a potential frame for discussing the design and psychometric issues needed to develop a developmentally sensitive measure of thriving (and to employ it in longitudinal research documenting the role of thriving in positive youth development). Any empirical assessment of thriving must contain two defining features. First, there needs to be multiple assessments of a person's functioning in relation to his or her culture's contextual “demands,” so that an estimate can be made of the range of behaviors in that particular domain. Second, these multiple measures of person–context relations needs to be repeated over time. Only when both features of measurement are present can full information be attained about whether there exists a plastic set of person–context relations (of whether developmental regulation involves changing behaviors that meet the adaptational demands of the context). Such research can chart the nature and bases of the emergence of individuals making significant contributions to the family and to moral and civil society.

Conclusions

Developmentally emergent and contextually mediated successful regulations of positive person–context relations ensure that individuals will have the nurturance and support needed for healthy development. Simultaneously, such regulation provides society with people having the mental and behavioral capacities—the inner and outer lives—requisite to maintain, perpetuate, and enhance their social world. In American society, this exchange involves socially just, equitable, and democratic social institutions (Lerner, in press; Lerner et al., 2002).

To sustain the individual and societal benefits of these person–context relations, socialization must promote (a) a moral orientation among youth that good is created through contributions to positive person–context relations and, as a derivative of this orientation, and (b) a commitment to build the institutions of civil society by constructing the ecological “space” for individual citizens to promote in their communities the culturally specific institutions of civil society (e.g., in American society these are institutions that assure social justice, equity, and democracy). Thus, when young people understand themselves as morally committed to and behaviorally engaged in building civil society, and when they as a consequence possess a transcendent sense of the importance in life of a commitment to an enduring nature or being beyond the limits of their own exist-

tence, they are able to be agents both in their own, healthy development and in the positive enhancement of other people and of society.

Given the crucial role of an integrated moral and civic identity and a spiritual sense in the thriving of youth and their communities, it is critical to align public policies and community actions (e.g., community-based, youth serving programs) in support of the development of such identity. One model for designing the person–context system through which such development occurs involves pursuing a vision of family-centered community building (Gore, 2003; Gore & Gore, 2002). The family-centered community-building model suggests that our nation can create a developmental system across generations that builds integrated moral and civic identities in its citizens (Gore, 2003). Such citizens will be able to sustain and to enhance the institutions of civil society.

Policies would be developed to enhance in communities the capacities of families to provide the individual and ecological assets suggested by Search Institute (Benson, 2003; Lerner et al., 2000, 2002). Within such a policy context, asset rich communities would enact activities (e.g., programs) that would provide young people with the resources needed to build and to pursue healthy lives that make productive contributions to self, family, and community. Such resources include a healthy start, a safe environment, education for marketable skills, the opportunity to “give back” to (to serve) the community, and freedom from prejudice and discrimination (Lerner et al., 2000).

Thriving will more likely emerge when youth develop in such a policy and community action or program context (Benson, 2003; Lerner et al., 2000; Pittman et al., 2001; Roth et al., 1998). In contemporary American society a competent, confident, connected, caring youth who possesses also character will have the moral orientation and the civic allegiance to use his or her skills to enact in himself or herself and, when a parent, promote in his or her children behaviors that “level the playing field” for all individuals. Committed—behaviorally, morally, and spiritually—to a better world beyond themselves, these American youth will act to sustain for future generations a society marked by social justice, equity, and democracy and a world wherein all young people may thrive.

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