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Positive Youth Development

A View of the Issues

Richard M. Lerner
Jason B. Almerigi
Christina Theokas
Tufts University
Jacqueline V. Lerner
Boston College

The positive youth development (PYD) perspective is a strength-based conception of adolescence. Derived from developmental systems theory, the perspective stressed that PYD emerges when the potential plasticity of human development is aligned with developmental assets. The research reported in this special issue, which is derived from collaborations among multiple university and community-based laboratories, reflects and extends past theory and research by documenting empirically (a) the usefulness of applying this strength-based view of adolescent development within diverse youth and communities; (b) the adequacy of conceptualizing PYD through Five Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring); (c) the individual and ecological developmental assets associated with PYD; and (d) implications for community programs and social policies pertinent to youth.

Keywords: *positive youth development; developmental contextualism; plasticity; developmental assets; youth development programs*

A new, positive, and strength-based vision and vocabulary for discussing America's young people has been gaining momentum and is beginning to replace long-held beliefs of the inevitable so-called storm and stress of adolescence and the predictable engagement by youth in risky or destructive behaviors. When problems occur, they are viewed as only one instance of a theoretically larger array of outcomes that include the possibility of positive developments. From this perspective, youth are not broken, in need of

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psychosocial repair, or problems to be managed (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). Rather, all youth are seen as resources to be developed (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, b).

The emergence of what has come to be termed the *positive youth development* (PYD) perspective has many roots, ranging from academic research, the voices of youth workers, to the discussion of national policies and the launching of funding initiatives designed to promote the healthy development of youth and families (e.g., Benson, 2003; Granger, 2002). First, research in comparative psychology and evolutionary biology has documented the potential for systematic change—for plasticity—in the course of development (e.g., Gottlieb, 1997). Moreover, research in life-span developmental psychology (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998), bioecological developmental psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), and life-course sociology (Elder, 1998) has demonstrated the possibility of optimizing individual and group change by altering bidirectional relations between individuals and their ecologies to capitalize on this plasticity. Other roots of this view of youth are found in community psychology (Trickett, Barone, & Buchanan, 1996), which emerged in the early 1960s as a critique of the disease or medical model, and which stressed primary prevention (i.e., developing strengths and building competencies) rather than secondary and tertiary prevention (treating later stages of pathology).

Similarly, youth workers have shared their positive outlook regarding the potential of youth, a perspective that has been gained through experiences with youth overcoming the odds, being resilient in the face of challenges, and taking initiative to enact change (e.g., Floyd & McKenna, 2003). Finally, changing demographic trends (e.g., the increase in dual-career families and single, working parents) have led to a focus on how youth spend their time after school and the opportunities present during this time to support the continued learning of skills, interests, and abilities. As such, policy initiative have been enacted (e.g., The 21st Century Community Learning Centers) that support the development of after-school programs that serve the needs of youth in their unique communities.

These diverse roots of the PYD perspective have been integrated and supported by contemporary developmental systems theories (Lerner, 2002). These models of human development eschew the reduction of individual and social behavior to fixed genetic influences and instead stress the relative plasticity of human development and argue that this potential for systematic change in behavior exists as a consequence of mutually influential relationships between the developing person and his or her biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture, physical and designed ecology, and historical niche. Adaptive developmental regulations emerge when these

bidirectional interactions between individual and context advance the well-being of both components.

The PYD perspective associated with developmental systems theory means that scholars, practitioners, and policy makers may always remain optimistic about finding some intervention to reduce problem behaviors. Moreover, the plasticity emphasized within the PYD perspective indicates as well that the developmental system can be directed to the promotion of desired outcomes, and not only to the prevention of undesirable behaviors.

The role and nature of community-based organizations have been directly implicated in this process of improving development. Eccles and Gootman (2002) summarized a growing body of research that indicates that community-based programs have the potential for promoting positive development among youth. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003a, b) reported that when such programs focus on developmental systems ideas that stress the strengths of youth, positive development may be instantiated through the promotion of what has been termed the Five Cs of PYD, that is, competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring. Lerner (2004) emphasized that such programs are most likely to result in the development of these Cs when they involve positive and sustained adult-youth relationships, youth skill-building activities, and opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of community-based activities (see also Blum, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a).

In sum, the theory of PYD that has emerged in the adolescent development literature specifies that if young people have mutually beneficial relations with the people and institutions of their social world, they will be on the way to a hopeful future marked by positive contributions to self, family, community, and civil society. Young people will thrive.

CURRENT RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The research reported in this special issue of the *Journal of Early Adolescence* reflects and extends past theory and research. Predicated on developmental systems conceptions of the potential for positive, healthy development among all young people, on the view that such potential may be realized by aligning the strengths of young people with the resources for positive development present in their diverse ecologies, and on the belief that diverse youth and diverse community contexts may instantiate youth-asset relations in distinct and yet similarly successful ways, all the research reported in this issue is derived from collaborations among multiple university or community-based laboratories. As such, although the research reported in this special issue reflects a common conceptual frame and interest in the PYD perspec-

tive, it represents as well what is emerging as a broadly accepted approach to understanding what can go right in the development of young people. The research reported in this issue reflects, then, a growing collaboration among university and community-based organizations about how to study and to promote positive development among the diverse youth of the nation and, potentially, the world.

For instance, in the first empirical article in this issue, Lerner et al. (2005 [this issue]). report findings from the first wave of the longitudinal, 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. They describe associations among PYD, participation in community youth development programs, and contributions of fifth-grade adolescents. Using structural equation modeling procedures, the study reports the first empirical evidence to date of the so-called reality of the Five Cs of PYD (as five first-order latent factors) and for their convergence on a second-order latent construct of PYD. Lerner et al. (2005 [this issue]) find that PYD and youth development program participation were related to the contributions made by youth to the world around them.

In the second empirical article, Taylor et al. (2005 [this issue]) report results from the third wave of the Overcoming the Odds (OTO) longitudinal study. The goal of the OTO study was to assess the developmental relations between the presence of individual and ecological assets and the interpersonal thriving (exemplary positive development) among a unique sample of African American male adolescents who were either members of inner-city Detroit gangs or youth living in the same communities but involved in youth development community-based organizations (CBOs). Taylor et al. (2005 [this issue]) report the not surprising finding that, relative to CBO youth, gang youth show fewer assets and lower levels of thriving. It is interesting to note, however, both groups showed comparable levels of stability across the 3 years in their assets, with individuals reporting either consistently high or consistently low numbers of assets. Furthermore, the presence of assets was most strongly coupled with thriving for gang members. Taylor et al. (2005 [this issue]) suggest that this pattern of findings may mean that adolescence may be a useful ontogenetic period within which to take steps to promote thriving among gang youth.

In the third article, King et al. (2005 [this issue]) discuss how the idea of thriving is instantiated in the voices of youth-serving practitioners, parents, and early and late adolescents. The study found that these individuals used a wide variety of terms to index thriving. In addition, these terms were able to be grouped into categories that reflect the general concepts used in the PYD literature (e.g., the Five Cs of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring) and the "sixth C" of contribution; this grouping indicates that, although there is diversity in specific vocabularies used to describe thriving,

on a more abstract level there is evidence for a common understanding of exemplary youth development.

Finally, the article by Theokas et al. (2005 [this issue]) used the most recent national data set from Search Institute (SI), the Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors survey, which was administered to 229,000 youth around the country in 1999 to 2000, to explore the structure of the developmental asset items included by SI in their survey to examine the resources believed requisite to promote thriving. Theokas et al. (2005 [this issue]) identify 14 scales that loaded on two second-order constructs, one that contained six first-order factors representing assets at the individual level and one ecological factor and the other that comprised six ecological first-order factors and one individual factor. Individual and ecological assets accounted for unique variance in thriving.

CONCLUSIONS

The empirical articles in this special issue document that scholarship about PYD is a broad and an active component of the field of adolescence, a point underscored by Vazsonyi in his commentary. In addition, the research presented in this issue illustrates that there are several converging substantive themes within the PYD field. The research provides evidence for the usefulness of applying a strength-based view of adolescent development to diverse youth, and of seeking to ascertain the individual and ecological assets that may be associated with PYD within diverse communities. The research suggests also the usefulness of conceptualizing PYD and of exemplary positive development, thriving, through the use of the Five Cs. In addition, however, the research documents that other terms are useful as well in understanding how diverse youth, parents, and practitioners may think about PYD.

On more a more general level, the work included in this special issue underscores the usefulness of multivariate and, in particular, longitudinal research in studying PYD among diverse young people and communities and, as well, underscores the fruitful scholarly productivity that may occur when multiple university and community laboratories and organizations collaborate in work aimed at understanding and enhancing the positive development of young people.

Finally, then, the scholarship reported in this special issue is united by a common interest in applying research to programs and, ultimately, to policies that promote PYD. A useful developmental theory is not just a means for integrating data about what is in human life. As suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1974, 2005), the idealization of the course of life represented in a useful

developmental theory provides a means for the scientist to generate data about what might be in human life.

The key to ensuring the positive development of youth rests on developing research-based policies that strengthen in diverse communities the capacities of families to raise healthy, thriving children. As evidenced by the research reported in this special issue, such policies must take a strength-based approach to youth; they should be developmental in nature; and they should focus on (have as their target or unit of analysis) enhancing the fit between the capacities of young people and the assets for positive development that exist in their communities. In such a policy context, young people may thrive and civil society may prosper.

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Reprint requests should be addressed to Richard M. Lerner, Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development, Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development, Tufts University, 301 Lincoln Filene Building, Medford, MA 02155; e-mail: richard.lerner@tufts.edu