

Positive Development among Diverse Youth

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Abstract

The positive youth development (PYD) perspective is based on the notion that all young people possess strengths and the capacity for healthy growth. The key hypothesis within the PYD perspective is that thriving occurs when the strengths of youth are aligned across adolescence with ecological resources (or “assets”) that promote positive, healthy development (e.g., assets such as high-quality parenting, mentoring, teaching, or coaching; effective youth development programs; or opportunities for youth to participate in and take leadership of valued family, school, and community activities). The 4-H Study of PYD has sought to bring data to bear on these ideas about the individual and ecological bases of PYD. We discuss several findings derived from tests of the model of PYD forwarded by Lerner and Lerner, including the structure of PYD, its antecedents in youth strengths and ecological developmental assets, and both positive and problematic outcomes among youth. The results of the 4-H Study of PYD provide important insights into how individual and contextual factors coalesce to promote adolescent thriving.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, a strengths-based vision of youth development emerged as a result of interests among researchers and practitioners in how to promote healthy and positive functioning among adolescents (Lerner *et al.*, 2013). In contrast to earlier developmental approaches that focused on addressing adolescents’ deficits or problem behaviors, the positive youth development (PYD) perspective is based on the notion that all young people possess strengths and the capacity for healthy growth. The key hypothesis within the PYD perspective is that thriving occurs when the strengths of youth are aligned across adolescence with ecological resources (or “assets”) that promote positive, healthy development (e.g., assets such as high-quality parenting, mentoring, teaching, or coaching; effective youth development

programs; or opportunities for youth to participate in and take leadership of valued family, school, and community activities).

There are several different models of the processes involved in PYD (e.g., Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011; Damon, 2008; Eccles, 2004; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2009; Larson, 2006; Lerner *et al.*, 2005; Masten, 2004; Spencer, 2006). However, all models are consistent with “relational developmental systems” theories, which posit that development is the result of mutually influential relations between an individual and his or her multilevel (i.e., social, cultural, natural) environment (Overton & Müeller, 2013). We discuss the features of relational developmental systems theories, and focus on the PYD model of Lerner and Lerner. This model of PYD has been tested more than other conceptions of PYD, and it emphasizes how individual strengths and ecological assets interrelate to shape the course of development.

RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL SYSTEMS THEORIES AND PYD

Developmental science seeks to describe, explain, and optimize intraindividual (or within-person) change and interindividual (or between-person) differences in intraindividual change (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselrode, 1977). Today, relational developmental systems theories are at the cutting edge of explanatory conceptions of human development (Overton & Müeller, 2013). These theories emphasize how bidirectional (\leftrightarrow) relations between an individual and his or her multilevel context shape the course of development. In other words, features of an individual’s context (e.g., institutions, social networks) can influence his or her development and, in turn, an individual can meaningfully contribute to his or her environment (e.g., through community contribution or engaged citizenship; Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss, & Levine, 2010). When these individual \leftrightarrow context relations benefit both the individual and his or her ecology, or environment, they may be considered “adaptive” (Brandtstädter, 2006). Adaptive individual \leftrightarrow context relations increase the likelihood that adolescents will thrive (or demonstrate positive and healthy functioning). PYD may be an instance of such adaptive relations.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

THE PYD PERSPECTIVE AND A FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL \leftrightarrow CONTEXT RELATIONS

The 4-H Study of PYD conducted by Lerner, Lerner, and colleagues (e.g., Lerner *et al.*, 2013) draws on the model of PYD that emphasizes the ways in which individual \leftrightarrow context relations may lead to health and positive behavior across the adolescent period. This research aims to enhance understanding of relations that promote thriving and prevent risk behaviors among adolescents. Within the 4-H Study, thriving is characterized by the

“Five Cs” of PYD (i.e., competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner *et al.*, 2013; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

As noted earlier, the key hypothesis within the PYD perspective is that each young person has strengths, and that aligning his or her strengths with ecological resources or assets will enhance the likelihood of positive development (Benson *et al.*, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the Lerner and Lerner relational developmental systems conception of PYD.

As suggested by the model displayed in the figure, PYD involves adaptive developmental relations between the strengths of youth and ecological assets. The figure illustrates that PYD promotes positive contributions to self, family, community, and civil society, and reduces the likelihood of risk/problem behaviors. A key component of the model is the arrow that feeds these outcomes back to the individual \leftrightarrow context relations, thus indicating the cyclical nature of adaptive developmental regulations. The figure also places the model within the broader ecology of human development, which is comprised of multiple levels of influence (e.g., biological, cultural, or historical/temporal; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Elder, Shanahan, & Jennings, 2015).

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH: EMPIRICAL SUPPORT FOR THE FIVE CS MODEL OF PYD

To test the ideas presented in Figure 1, researchers at the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development (IARYD) at Tufts University launched the 4-H Study of PYD in the fall of 2002. The 4-H Study of PYD is a longitudinal investigation that was supported by a grant from the National 4-H Council and the Altria Corporation. Data were collected annually from youth in grades 5 through 12.

Full details of the methodology of the 4-H Study can be found in numerous empirical publications (e.g., R.M. Lerner, J.V. Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011). However, it is useful to describe briefly some key features of this project. Fifth graders, gathered during the 2002–2003 school year (which was wave 1 of the study), were the initial cohort within the design of the project. Subsequent waves of the study involved the addition of a new cohort (of youth of the current grade level of the initial cohort); this new cohort was then followed longitudinally. Overall, across eight waves of the study, approximately 7000 youth and 3500 of their parents from 42 states were surveyed. At all eight waves, the sample varied in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family structure, rural–urban location, geographic region, and youth program participation experiences.

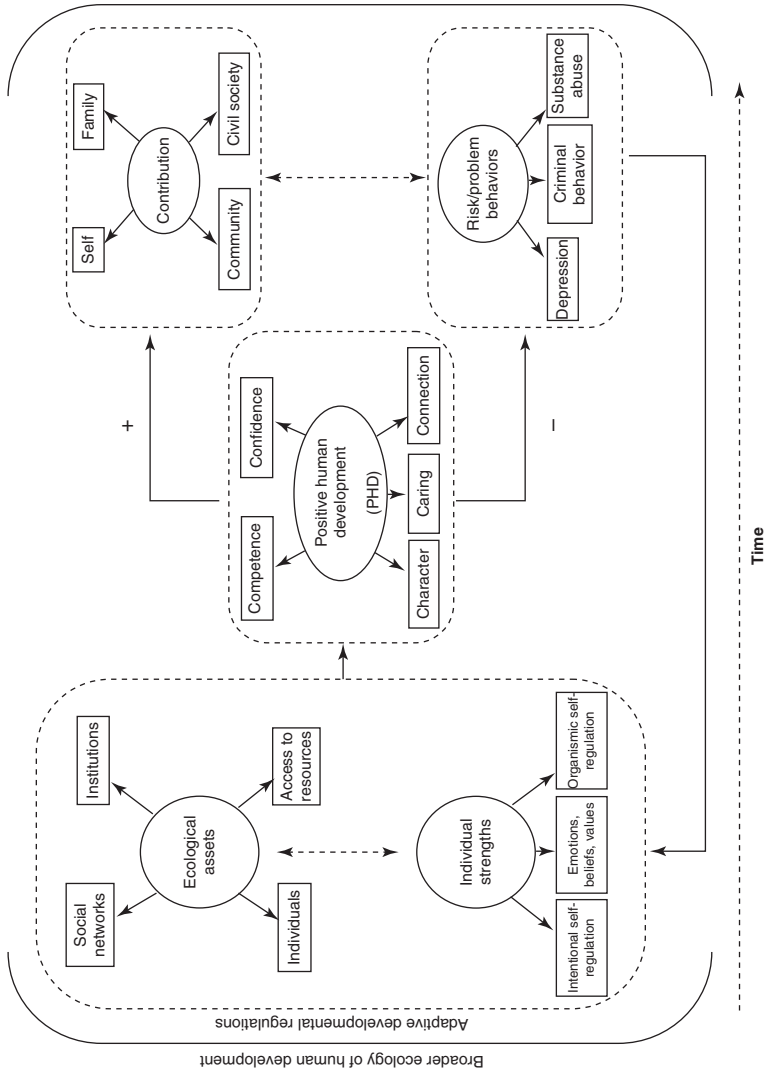


Figure 1 A relational, developmental systems model of the individual ↔ context relations involved in the Lerner and Lerner conception of the PYD developmental process.

Data were collected through the use of student and parent questionnaires, assessments of school district administrators, and web-based or census tract information. These data collection procedures enabled the identification of the resources, or developmental assets, that exist in these settings of youth. In addition, through obtaining information about the young person's strengths (e.g., which we explain here includes intentional self-regulation (ISR), school engagement, and hopeful future expectations), the study assessed key individual attributes of adolescents.

Patterns of participation in out-of-school-time (OST) activities were also assessed. These activities included, but were not limited to, youth development programs (such as 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, Scouts, YMCA, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters), sports, arts and crafts, or service organizations. Information about civic engagement/civic contribution, future aspirations and expectations, relationships with parents, friends, and other adults, and values were also measured. In addition, parents were asked about the nature and composition of their household; their parenting style; and their education, employment, and neighborhood.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings of the 4-H Study have brought empirical information to bear on several key ideas pertinent to the Lerner and Lerner PYD model (Figure 1). We discuss several facets of these findings, including the structure of PYD, its antecedents in youth strengths and ecological developmental assets, and both positive and problematic youth outcomes.

THE STRUCTURE OF PYD

Support for the Five Cs model of PYD illustrated in Figure 1 has been provided by the 4-H Study data set from grades 5 through grades 11 (e.g., Lerner *et al.*, 2011). While the overall structure of PYD was maintained across grades, at higher grades athletic competence was no longer a relevant indicator of Competence and physical appearance significantly related to the construct of cConfidence.

THE STRENGTHS OF YOUTH

From the relational developmental systems model of PYD, all young people have strengths that may be capitalized on to promote thriving across the adolescent years. One example of the emerging strengths of adolescents is their ability to contribute to their contexts. Other instances of strengths are specific

self-regulations in key contexts of adolescents (e.g., being engaged in school; Li, 2011) and having optimistic views of their futures (Schmid *et al.*, 2011).

Intentional self-regulation. ISR is defined as an example of the individual's "contribution" to adaptive individual \leftrightarrow context relationships. Using the selection (S), optimization (O), and compensation (C) (or SOC) measure of ISR developed by Baltes, Baltes, and colleagues (e.g., Freund & Baltes, 2002), Gestsdóttir, Lerner, and colleagues (e.g., Gestsdottir, Bowers, von Eye, Napolitano, & Lerner, 2010) found that self-regulation is a key individual strength of youth. SOC scores related positively to indicators of PYD and negatively to problem behaviors. However, when patterns of ISR in youth in grade 5 to grade 11 were examined, the majority of youth experienced a steady decline in ISR (Bowers *et al.*, 2011). Lower levels of parental warmth, parental monitoring, and school involvement at grade 5 predicted the late onset of ISR. In turn, adolescents who experienced steep declines in self-regulation reported lower levels of PYD and Contribution to their communities at grade 11. However, for youth who had high or increasingly more positive trajectories or ISR, both PYD and Contribution scores were higher.

These findings highlight the importance of recognizing that youth have the potential to develop in different directions. For example, despite starting at the same low point in development, individuals have the potential to move in different directions and, as a result, individuals have the potential to achieve different outcomes (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996).

Hopeful Future. Emotions, such as hope for one's future (along with the cognitive and behavioral skills that youth need to activate ISR) and skills for achieving future goals may also play an important role in the positive development of youth. For youth in grades 7, 8, and 9, the role of a hopeful future expectation predicted pathways of positive and negative developmental outcomes (Schmid *et al.*, 2011). Findings showed hopeful future was a stronger predictor than self-regulation for PYD and Contribution. In turn, both hopeful future and self-regulation predicted PYD, but earlier hopeful expectations for the future may be influential for later intentional self-regulation abilities.

School Engagement. School engagement depicts the way in which youth cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally interact with the school setting. Among 4-H Study youth in grades 5 and 6, behavioral and emotional school engagement influenced the relationship between ecological assets and individual strengths and academic competence, such that emotional engagement was indirectly linked to academic competence, via behavioral

engagement (Li, J.V. Lerner, & R.M. Lerner, 2010). In another study (Li & Lerner, 2011), boys, youth of color, and youth from less advantaged families tended to be in less favorable groups for both behavioral and emotional engagement. Youth who experienced more positive pathways of behavioral or emotional engagements tended to have better grades, were less depressed, and were less likely to be involved in delinquent behaviors and drug abuse than youth who followed less desirable pathways.

The contextual predictors of school engagement have also been studied (Li, Lynch, Kevin, Liu, & Lerner, 2011). Girls and youth from more advantaged socioeconomic status (SES) families exhibited higher behavioral and emotional engagement, on average, than boys and youth from less advantaged families. Peer support positively predicted behavioral and emotional school engagement, whereas associating with misbehaving friends and bullying involvement were negatively associated with both aspects of school engagement. "Hanging out" with friends without set plans and engaging in excessive media use were also associated with lower behavioral engagement in school, lower academic achievement, and higher rates of risk behaviors. However, youth who ate dinner with their families reported higher levels of emotional engagement, lower depression and risk behaviors, and better grades. Engagement in civic activities was associated with higher levels of emotional engagement.

ECOLOGICAL ASSETS AND PYD

The relationships among assets in the families, schools, and neighborhoods of youth with positive and negative developmental outcomes were assessed among fifth-grade youth from the 4-H Study (Theokas & Lerner, 2006). Ecological assets were placed into four categories: (i) individuals, (ii) physical or institutional, (iii) collective activity, and (iv) accessibility, and were measured across the three contexts. Different dimensions of the family, school, and neighborhood settings had the most comprehensive impact on the different developmental outcomes. Specifically, collective activity in the family, accessibility in school, and human resources in the neighborhood were the most powerful developmental assets in the ecology of youth. Across settings, assets associated with individuals were the best predictors of PYD. Eating dinner together as a family was one of the strongest predictors of PYD when considering family assets.

Further analyses of the youth from Theokas and Lerner's work (2006) indicated that neighborhood factors interact with adolescent extracurricular activity involvement to predict PYD, depressive symptoms, and risk behaviors, and that these relationships differed for boys and girls (Urban, Lewin-Bizan, & Lerner, 2009). Girls who lived in lower asset neighborhoods

showed higher levels of PYD and lower levels of depressive symptoms and risk behaviors when they participated in extracurricular activities. In contrast, girls in high-asset neighborhoods who displayed high levels of participation in activities exhibited increased levels of risk behaviors, particularly if they lived in neighborhoods with abundant physical resources. The opposite relationships were found in boys, with moderate to high levels of activity involvement predicting lower levels of PYD and higher levels of risk behaviors for boys living in lower asset neighborhoods; for boys living in high-asset neighborhoods, activity involvement showed benefits, such as increased levels of PYD and decreased levels of risk behaviors.

In sum, these findings point to the importance of the role of youth strengths (e.g., intentional self-regulation skills, hopeful expectations for their futures, and school engagement), and the importance of developmental ecological assets (e.g., in families, schools, and neighborhoods) to promote PYD and decrease levels of risk behaviors among youth. The results from the 4-H Study provide support for the use of the relational developmental theory-based, PYD perspective in framing research that enhances understanding of the intricacies of the individual \leftrightarrow context relations that put young people on a thriving journey across the adolescent period.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of the 4-H Study of PYD provide important insights into what defines PYD and which individual and contextual factors might relate to adolescent thriving. We believe that a relational developmental systems approach is useful in understanding the importance of mutually influential relations between adolescents and their real-world ecological settings.

The 4-H Study results show that youth who are developing positively are also engaging in risk behaviors at some level, suggesting that risk behaviors need to be studied along with positive behaviors. The multiple trajectories of development seen in the 4-H Study point to the need for further research aimed at understanding the factors that contribute to these individual differences. In short, although the PYD perspective replaces the deficit view of youth as “problems to be managed” with the view that youth are “resources to be developed” (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), evidence from the 4-H Study nevertheless suggests that an integrative preventive–promotive focus may be the best course to pursue in increasing the likelihood that youth will thrive.

However, in light of the importance of extending current PYD work to address fully the diversity of America’s youth, important new research directions must be taken. Most PYD research is currently focused on adolescents who are reasonably accessible—that is, youth who will volunteer to participate in studies and from whom consent will be provided by their parents.

While, perhaps, 95% of America's youth are included in these assessments, the hardest to reach youth have not been identified. No existing research examines whether the PYD model applies to youth from challenged ecological circumstances (i.e., from low SES, highly disorganized, and crime-ridden communities), or to youth from highly mobile families, are emancipated from their parents, or live in places that are not readily accessible (e.g., homeless youth). There is also relatively little information about youth in extremely privileged environments (Luthar, 2003). Nevertheless, if the PYD model is to inform policies and programs for *all* of America's youth, it is important to gain knowledge about the applicability of the model for youth from all portions of the social-ecological and economic distributions. Such future work needs to be certain that, if access can be attained for such youth, the measures of their behavior and development have applicability to them. Such measurement is essential in order to understand how thriving among youth from these diverse settings can be enhanced.

We believe that as all members of the PYD scholarly community—both researchers and practitioners—come together in the service of making such integration a high-priority agenda item, it will be crucial for funders of PYD scholarship and application to take actions to support and extend such integrated work. An integrative focus on youth strengths and ecological developmental assets in research may afford the generation of evidence-based actions that decrease risk behaviors and promote the life chances of diverse youth.

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entrepreneurs study,” and a poster titled, “*The entrepreneurship intentional self regulation questionnaire: Factorial and concurrent validation*” presented at the Society for Research on Adolescence.

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