Relations between youths' conceptions of spirituality and their developmental outcomes☆

Anthony G. James [a, *], Mark A. Fine [b]

[a] Department of Family Studies and Social Work, Miami University, United States
[b] Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of North Carolina — Greensboro, United States

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study uses a positive youth development (PYD) approach to explore whether differences in youths' conceptions of spirituality were linked to patters of difference regarding 6 domains of PYD. Using data from the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, findings revealed a consistent trend across 6 domains of positive development. Youth who had coherent conceptions of being spiritual generally scored highest on measures of positive development, whereas youth in the ambiguous spirituality group (i.e., less coherent) scored the lowest. However, follow-up analyses reveal that such relations did not hold over time. Implications of findings include youth development professionals aiming to nurture the spiritual growth of youth should encourage more coherent notions of spirituality among the youth they serve.

Generally, spirituality among youth is thought of as beneficial for their development. Previous mixed methods research found that the extent to which youth perceived themselves as spiritual is indeed positively correlated with indicators of positive youth development (PYD), both concurrently and longitudinally (James, Fine, & Turner, 2012). Qualitative data from that study found that youth conceptualize being spiritual in 10, somewhat mutually exclusive, ways. However, the quantitative correlations did not take into account the different ways that youth conceptualized being spiritual, which can inaccurately suggest that spirituality — regardless of how it is conceived — relates to PYD. This study builds on the previous study by testing the following question. Are qualitative differences in conception of spirituality linked to differences in PYD? Additionally, this study provides a broad three group model of how youth conceptualize spirituality.

Theoretical background: strength-based perspective

A recent theory of PYD (Lerner et al., 2005), with a foci on advancing adaptive developmental regulations, conceptualizes PYD in its 5 C (competence, confidence, character, connection, caring/compassion) model; it asserts that over time youth develop on a course that is characterized by thriving. Thriving is conceptualized as the 6th C (contribution), or

---

youth making meaningful contributions to self, family, community, and other institutions in his/her environment. The promise of this theory is that youth have inner strengths or assets (5 Cs) that can be developed and nurtured by persons and institutions in their environment. In turn, youth use those same strengths to make meaningful contributions in their social, civil, and political worlds (Lerner, 2004), which is reflective of advanced developmental regulations.

Lerner et al. (2005) operationalized the 5 C model, providing a method for measuring the Cs in empirical research. *Competence* emphasizes youths' positive perceptions of their own actions among various domains (e.g., social, academic), whereas *Confidence* refers to youths' internal sense of their efficacy or worth. *Connection* refers to positive bonds that occur through person–environment interactions, with *Character* referring to the youths' respect for societal and cultural rules, exhibiting moral behavior, and integrity. *Caring* refers to a sense of sympathy and empathy for others. The sixth C (Contribution) represents the thriving, and evidenced by the youth using the inner C strengths to make positive contributions to self, family, and community.

Spirituality and PYD

With the growth of PYD research, scholars have tested the role of spirituality in this model, with findings confirming correlations between PYD and youths' spirituality (Dowling et al., 2004; James et al., 2012; Warren, Lerner, & Phelps, 2012). However, a lingering issue is the myriad of ways spirituality is conceptualized, raising the question of whether spirituality, regardless of its conceptualization, is good for youth or whether youth with different conceptualizations of spirituality have different patterns of PYD.

The purpose of this study is to extend the literature base by examining if youths' differing conceptions of spirituality have different patterns of adjustment. James et al. (2012) found that youth conceptualized spirituality in 10 ways. Using data from Waves 6 and 7 of the 4-H Study of PYD (Lerner, Lerner, Phelps, & Colleagues, 2009), they found that youths' self-ratings were linked to each of 6 C PYD factors, however, they did not examine how differences in conception of spirituality are linked to youths' PYD scores. Therefore, it is unknown whether youth with different conceptions of spirituality differ with regard to their levels of PYD. Building on that work, we sought to investigate this gap in the literature.

Our approach to conceptualizing spirituality in this study was to construct a definition that was broad enough to be inclusive, yet specific enough to be somewhat distinct from other markers of PYD. Thus, we constructed a smaller number of broader groupings of spirituality that both subsume the 10 spiritual categories from James et al. (2012) and align with how scholars typically conceptualize youths' spirituality.

Broader groupings of spirituality and links to PYD

A thorough review of the literature revealed that scholars usually conceptualize child and youth spirituality in three ways: spirituality as a source of transcendence and/or finding meaning (Damon, 2008; Hyde, 2008; Lerner et al., 2009), spirituality as a pathway toward virtue and generosity toward others (Warren et al., 2012), and spirituality being an unspoken, yet essential or guiding force, in one's life (Berryman, 2001). Thus, we used this as our guide for defining the construct in this study.

Established meaning in life

The first broad spiritual group emphasizes a spiritual life that is defined by a primary purpose of finding or establishing meaning in life. Meaning refers to "significance" or that there is something more to life than one's own motives and desires; further, being spiritual is related to life having a particular significance that transcends the self. While the source of that meaning may vary (e.g., art, ministry), the youth have identified a purpose that they can commit to, which is one indicator of positive development (Damon, 2008).

Having established meaning also aligns with Lerner et al.'s (2009) and Hyde's (2008) positions on youths' spirituality in that it emphasizes transcendental and behavioral aspects of life that advance PYD. Additionally, youths' awareness of their inner and external lives facilitates transcendence and finding meaning in life (Schnell & Becker, 2006), while Hyde's (2008) work indicated that spirituality is the stitch that helps youth establish meaning in their lives, likely through their interactions with others.

Being a good young person

The next broad spiritual group emphasizes virtue and generosity toward others, which aligns with Warren et al.'s (2012) belief that generosity is inextricably linked with being a spiritual young person. More specifically, this group emphasizes a spirituality where virtue, being welcoming and personable, and possess a generally positive disposition are emphasized. According to Warren et al. (2012) and Lerner et al. (2009), when youth have a strong spiritual life, they are more likely to be generous, which inspires or motivates them to contribute to the greater good of society, which parallels the goas of thriving in the PYD model.

Ambiguous spirituality

The final broad group defines a spirituality that is not clearly or coherently articulated, where individuals use vague or ambiguous language to conceptualize the term. In actuality, this type of spirituality is not uncommon. According to