



The configuration protective model: Factors associated with adolescent behavioral and emotional problems



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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the association between quantity, variety, and configuration of developmental assets with risk behaviors (tobacco and alcohol use) and developing emotional problems (depressive feelings and suicidal thoughts). A sample of 12,040 high school students completed surveys investigating youth health and risk behaviors, and developmental assets. Independent one-step logistic regression analyses showed that adolescents reporting a higher quantity of assets, and possessing them in multiple domains, tended to have a lower likelihood of experiencing behavioral and emotional problems. The negative association between developmental assets and negative outcomes was more consistent when quantity and variety were taken into account simultaneously, thus supporting the *configuration protective model*. A sufficient amount of strengths, in an adequate number of different domains, seems to provide the strongest protection against negative developmental outcomes. The research and clinical implications of findings are discussed.

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According to developmental system theories, positive human development emerges from mutually beneficial interactions between individuals and their personal environmental resources that nurture healthy trajectories across the lifespan (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006). Using this theoretical perspective as a basis, researchers have begun to focus on positive development in adolescence (e.g., Furlong, Gilman, & Huebner, 2014; Knoop, 2011; Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). This increased attention to positive youth mental health has resulted in several subfields of research, including positive youth development (e.g., Larson, 2000), positive psychology (e.g., Kirschman, Johnson, Bender, & Roberts, 2009), and strength-based approaches to intervention (e.g., Proctor, 2014). These frameworks were formulated in contrast to the traditional deficit perspective and include a set of principles defining youth as resources to be developed instead of as problems to be resolved (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

A key assumption of theoretical perspectives on positive development in adolescence is that while the absence of risk factors does not assure high levels of well-being, youths possessing positive assets have a greater likelihood of reaching positive outcomes (e.g., physical and psychological well-being) and a lesser likelihood of experiencing risk and problem behaviors (e.g., of both internalizing and externalizing problems; Lerner, 2004). This assumption has both theoretical and practical

implications — instead of eliminating the risk factors associated with negative outcomes, as deficit-based approaches suggest, research and practice could alternatively focus on identifying and promoting positive assets. To date, scholars have not reached a strong consensus on which specific assets promote positive development in adolescence (Larson & Tran, 2014), and few studies have evaluated whether there are general configurations of assets that are particularly effective in preventing risk behaviors and emotional problems in youth. The current study aimed to advance the literature on adolescent development by examining how different configurations of psychological and social assets are associated with protective effects of lower levels of youth involvement in risk behaviors (tobacco and alcohol use) and the development of emotional problems (depressive feelings and suicidal thoughts).

Factors protecting adolescents from risk behaviors and emotional problems: Toward a protective configuration model

The specific external and internal assets involved in positive youth development have been debated for more than two decades. To date, there is no conclusive definition or single way to operationalize and measure positive development in adolescence (Larson & Tran, 2014). Researchers have not demonstrated conclusively that a specific asset or constellation of characteristics is associated with a decrease in adverse outcomes (Corbin, 2005). The multiple and complex reciprocal influences between an adolescent and the environment hinder the identification of a direct pathway to risk and problem behaviors. Rather, adolescents experience a wide range of potential environmental and personal events that create circumstances that tilt the odds toward

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either positive or negative outcomes (Dent & Cameron, 2003; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000).

Although there is no decisive determination of which assets are implicated in positive development, there is a general consensus that a healthy developmental trajectory in adolescence entails multiple dimensions, such as cognitive, social, emotional, and civic (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009). Within these domains, the study of positive development in adolescence is replete with assets – both internal and external – that have been identified and studied across the various subfields. Some of the most influential and comprehensive research on developmental assets comes from the work of Benson and colleagues who used the Search Institute's *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* survey to develop a model of 40 key developmental assets across both internal and external domains (e.g., Benson, 1996). The 40 assets identified include assets in the categories of support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, positive values, social competencies, and commitment to learning, among others (e.g., Benson, 1996; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales & Leffert, 1998). Other subfields have narrowed in on specific internal and external assets. For example, the realm of positive youth development research often focuses on the “Five Cs” – Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring (e.g., Jellic, Bobek, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2007; Lerner, Bowers, Geldhof, Gestottir, & DeSouza, 2012). In positive psychology, a wide range of assets has been recognized, with some of the most prominent being hope, optimism, life satisfaction, and gratitude (e.g., Furlong, Gilman, et al., 2014; Kirschman et al., 2009). Similarly, the field of resiliency has highlighted a number of protective factors, comprising both internal assets, such as problem-solving skills and self-regulation, and external assets, including authoritative parenting, socioeconomic advantages, and close relationships with adults in a caring community (e.g., Masten et al., 2009).

The sheer number of assets that have been implicated in the positive development of adolescents precludes a comprehensive review of every factor. Assets tend to have complex relations with each other and various developmental outcomes. The literature is filled with examples of multifinality, in which the same variable can result in multiple different outcomes, and equifinality, in which the same outcome can be derived from multiple developmental trajectories. Moreover, a variable can be related to positive development in one domain but negative outcomes in another. For example, adolescent participation in sports can serve as a protective factor for tobacco use (Guo, Reeder, McGee, & Darling, 2011), depression, and suicidal ideation (Babiss & Gangwisch, 2009), but it has also been implicated as a risk factor for alcohol use (Sonderlund et al., 2014).

To further complicate an understanding of positive youth development, research has a tendency to yield contradictory results. For instance, whereas researchers generally find that higher academic achievement is associated with reduced alcohol use (Kostelecky, 2005), tobacco use (Scal, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2003), and general substance use (Thai, Connell, & Tebes, 2010), this is not always the case (Fang, Barnes-Ceeny, & Schinke, 2011; Meyers, 2013). Similarly, research generally supports the notion that self-esteem and self-efficacy are protective against suicidal ideation (Babiss & Gangwisch, 2009; Kidd & Shahar, 2008; Sharaf, Thompson, & Walsh, 2009); however, Roberts, Roberts, and Xing (2010) failed to find this association. Perhaps the clearest example of inconsistency in the literature on protective benefits of youths' assets exists between social support and suicidality. Numerous researchers have found that social support reduces the risk of suicidal ideation and behaviors (e.g., Babiss & Gangwisch, 2009; Beautrais, 2003), yet others discover no association (Armstrong & Manion, 2006; Roberts et al., 2010), and one study even found that peer relationships increased the risk for suicidality in some students (Wong & Maffini, 2011).

Even when the relation between assets and outcomes is relatively straightforward, there is generally a plethora of protective factors that have been linked to any given developmental outcome. For example,

assets that protect against depression include individual, peer, family, school, and community factors. These assets include everything from optimism (e.g., Piko, Kovacs, & Fitzpatrick, 2009) to connectedness to family, peers, and school (e.g., Costello, Swednsen, Rose, & Dierker, 2008) to community engagement (e.g., Van Vorhees et al., 2008). Although identifying all of the assets that might protect youth from negative developmental outcomes is of interest, it is simply not feasible to assess for and intervene with all of these factors. The impracticality of this approach becomes all the more evident when taking into account that interventionists do not want to solely prevent depression but also prevent a host of other internalizing and externalizing problems. The field of positive youth development requires a consensus regarding which assets are most strongly associated with an extensive range of developmental outcomes; however, as of yet, researchers are not in agreement regarding what assets are integral across outcomes (Larson & Tran, 2014).

The lack of a strong consensus on the array of assets that protect youth from engaging in risk behaviors or experiencing emotional problems partially derives from the tendency to view assets in isolation or as independent constructs (Author, removed for blind review, 2014) instead of considering how these assets combine in general configurations. Building on the cumulative-risk framework (Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng, 2009), positing that youths exposed to multiple risk factors in different domains (individual and social) are at greater risk of internalizing and externalizing problems (Esbensen et al., 2009), scholars developed the cumulative-assets framework. This perspective has been adopted to evaluate how the accumulation of internal (e.g., self-efficacy and emotional competence) and external (e.g., supportive teachers and peers) assets protects adolescents against risk behaviors and emotional problems (Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain, Sems, & Van Dulmen, 2006).

Recently, scholars are questioning whether the quantity of assets possessed by an adolescent is enough to reflect the complexity of the assets needed to face developmental challenges in the contemporary society. For instance, Larson and Tran (2014) pointed out that adolescent development is not a linear concept, but stems from complex sets of skills and dispositions. According to Larson and Tran, these skills and dispositions allow youth to understand and cope with the developmental challenges typical of complex societies, such as adapting to contradictions and incongruities and learning the different rules and values characterizing different contexts. This recent conceptualization of positive development argues that instead of single protective assets, there might be sets of skills that allow youth to navigate complex life challenges, thus protecting youth against the development of risk behaviors and emotional problems (and promoting their well-being).

The covitality index proposed by Furlong, You, Renshaw, Smith, and O'Malley (2014) offers a framework that can be used to organize assets across domains, allowing researchers to examine not only how many assets adolescents possess but also the number of domains in which they have assets. This model consists of four first-order core positive mental health domains: belief in self, belief in others, emotional competence, and engaged living (Renshaw et al., 2014). The first domain, *belief in self*, is comprised of self-efficacy, self-awareness, and persistence and is derived primarily from social-emotional learning (SEL) literature (e.g., Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). The second domain, *belief in others*, is drawn largely from the positive youth development and resiliency literature and consists of school support, peer support, and family coherence (e.g., Masten, 2001). *Emotional competence*, the third domain, includes emotional regulation, empathy, and behavioral regulation; this domain was also derived mostly from the SEL literature (e.g., Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). The final domain, originating from the positive youth psychology literature, is *engaged living*, which is comprised of gratitude, zest, and optimism (e.g., Gilman, Huebner, & Furlong, 2009). Together, these domains combine to form the second-order covitality index, which has been conceptualized as “the synergistic effect of positive mental health

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