



Editorial

Exploring the foundations and functions of adolescent thriving within the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development: A view of the issues[☆]Richard M. Lerner^{a,*}, Alexander von Eye^b, Jacqueline V. Lerner^c, Selva Lewin-Bizan^a^a Tufts University, United States^b Michigan State University, United States^c Boston College, United States

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ABSTRACT

We introduce this special issue on the foundations and functions of adolescent thriving by summarizing the developmental systems theory-based, positive youth development (PYD) perspective that frames much of contemporary research about health and positive development across the adolescent period and that, more specifically, frames the 4-H Study of PYD, the data set from which the empirical work in this special issue is drawn. We discuss the different ways in which the articles in this special issue elucidate different facets of the PYD perspective and summarize the implications of this research for future scholarship and for applications aimed at improving the life chances of diverse adolescents.

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Contemporary developmental science explores the conceptual, methodological, policy, and empirical bases of understanding and applying research to improve human development across the life span (Lerner, 2006). The cutting-edge conceptual frame for such scholarship involves developmental systems theoretical models, conceptions that seek to describe, explain, and optimize mutually influential relations (termed “developmental regulations”; Brandtstädter, 2006) that exist between the developing individual and his or her complex and changing context, represented as individual \leftrightarrow context relations (Lerner, 2002).

Within the study of the adolescent portion of the life span, this interest in applying developmental science to optimize behavior and development has involved the positive youth development (PYD) perspective (Damon, 2004). Derived from developmental systems ideas, the core idea within the PYD perspective is that all adolescents have strengths, for instance, by virtue of the plasticity (i.e., the potential for systematic change in structure or function across ontogeny) that exists within the developmental system. Thus, every adolescent has the potential to change the course of his or her own development. According to the PYD perspective, there are also strengths that exist in the ecology of youth; that is, there are resources in families, schools, neighborhoods, and structured, out-of-school-time (OST) activities that can support the actualization of adolescent change in more positive directions. These contextual resources are termed “ecological developmental assets” (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sems, 2006). Predicated on the assumption that all youth have characteristics of individual and social structure and function that can be enhanced, the key hypothesis within the PYD perspective is that, if the strengths of youth are aligned across adolescence with ecological developmental assets, then every young person's development can be improved (Lerner, 2005, 2009; Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009).

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This special issue – which focuses on reporting current research derived from a large, national, longitudinal data set, the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD) – presents major empirical examples of the usefulness of the developmental systems theory-based PYD perspective. The perspective stands as a conceptual alternative to the long-held deficit models of this developmental period (Lerner, 2009; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009) and, as such, provides a rationale for how this strength-based conception of youth may provide, on the one hand, a revised research agenda for research about adolescent development and, on the other hand, a different focus for policies and programs aimed at enhancing the life chances of diverse young people.

Instead of searching for the conditions that may decrease problem behaviors or prevent problems from occurring, the PYD perspective broadens the scope of research to include an assessment of the individual \leftrightarrow context relations that promote thriving across adolescence and that, as well, may have a preventive effect. In addition, the PYD perspective changes the focus of applications to policies and programs. From this perspective, thriving in adolescence is not seen as the absence of problems (i.e., thriving is not conceived as the absence of bullying, drinking, unsafe sex, school failure, or substance abuse, etc.). Instead, thriving is seen as the growth of attributes that mark a flourishing, healthy young person, e.g., the characteristics termed the “Five Cs” of PYD – competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003) and youth contributions to self, family, community, and civil society (Lerner, Alberts, & Bobek, 2007; Lerner et al., 2005).

Accordingly, the PYD perspective suggests that policies should be directed not only to problem reduction or prevention but, as well, to fostering conditions that promote such attributes of thriving. At the same time, the perspective suggests that practitioners should identify the actions needed to provide youth with the individual \leftrightarrow context relations that place them on a thriving trajectory across adolescence. These actions involve positive and sustained adult–youth relations, life skills building opportunities, and opportunities for youth participation in, and leadership of, valued family, school, and community activities (i.e., actions that are termed by Lerner, 2004, as the “Big 3” attributes of effective youth-serving programs).

The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD)

The several articles in this special issue provide evidence about the empirical usefulness of the PYD perspective and discuss how – in the areas of youth development of concern within a given article – research testing the PYD perspective does have new and important implications for both adolescent development research and for the application of developmental science. All articles within this special issue draw on data derived from the 4-H Study data set.

The 4-H Study was designed to test the idea that when the strengths of youth are aligned across adolescence with family, school, and community resources (and, in particular, resources provided by community-based, out-of-school time youth development programs, such as 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, YMCA, and scouting), positive youth development (operationalized by the Five Cs of Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection, and Caring) and, as well, youth community Contributions (the “sixth C” of PYD) will occur (Lerner, 2004, 2007; Lerner et al., 2005). Beginning in 2002, with the collection of data from about 1,700 fifth grade youth and about 1,100 of their parents, the 4-H study, which employs a version of a cohort sequential longitudinal design (Lerner et al., 2005), has grown to more than 6,000 youth and more than 3,000 of their parents from 41 states. At this writing, the study is launching its eighth wave of data collection, which assesses youth in Grade 12.

Although all of the contributions to the special issue use the 4-H data set, the authors come from across the United States, Europe, and Asia. These researchers are using the 4-H Study data set to link facets of adolescent development to issues of applied significance for young people and their family, school, and community settings. Whether studying youth civic engagement and community contributions, out-of-school-time activities of youth, adolescent participation in youth development programs, internalizing or externalizing problems in adolescence, academic achievement, or school bullying, all papers in the special issue focus on the relations between developmental processes, involving mutually influential relations between individuals and their contexts, and issues of applied significance. The contributions to the special issue bring together a multidisciplinary group of scholars (e.g., from developmental science, education, and medicine), and from multiple university or community-based organizations, both in the U.S. and internationally.

The special issue: An overview

Using data from Grades 5 to 7 of the 4-H Study, Phelps et al. (2009–this issue) assessed the structure and development of PYD. Building on Grade 5 4-H Study findings, that the “Five Cs” (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring) could be empirically defined as latent constructs converging on a second-order construct, labeled PYD, the authors used structural models to assess the fit of this original model for Grades 5, 6, and 7. Results indicated that PYD continued to be a robust construct that can be defined comparably for Grades 6 and 7, as it was in Grade 5.

Phelps, et al. discuss implications for future research and for applications of the finding that, across the three years of early adolescence that were assessed (about ages 10 to 12), there is continuity in the structure of PYD. For example, using this index of PYD, future research will be able to employ a developmentally equivalent index of thriving to study the role of individual and contextual developmental assets in promoting PYD across the early years of adolescence. In turn, the indices of the Five Cs and of the overall measure of PYD provide parents, teachers, and youth development program leaders with a developmentally-sensitive means to measure PYD among young adolescents or to evaluate the role of youth-serving programs in fostering thriving across the early adolescent years.

In turn, Gestsdóttir, Lewin-Bizan, von Eye, Lerner, and Lerner (2009–this issue) assessed the structure and function of selection, optimization, and compensation in middle adolescence. They noted that intentional self-regulation is a core facet of human

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