



Individual and contextual bases of thriving in adolescence: A view of the issues[☆]

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We introduce this special issue on the individual and contextual bases of adolescent thriving by describing the relational 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. All articles point to the combined role of characteristics of the person and ecological assets in the family, school, or community settings of youth to promote the development of PYD. We discuss how these articles provide evidence about the empirical usefulness of the PYD perspective and discuss how research testing the PYD model has new and important implications for both adolescent development research and for the application of developmental science.

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Developmental science seeks to describe, explain, and optimize intraindividual change and interindividual differences in intraindividual change across the life span (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade, 1977). The contemporary, cutting-edge theoretical frame for such scholarship involves relational developmental systems theoretical models (Overton, 2010). Examples of these models include Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), action theory models of intentional, goal-directed behaviors (e.g., Baltes, 1997; Brandtstädter, 1998, 2006; Heckhausen, 1999, 2000; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schultz, 2010), Elder's (1998; Elder & Shanahan, 2006) life-course theory, the Thelen and Smith (1998, 2006) dynamic systems theory, Magnusson's (1999; Magnusson & Stattin, 1998, 2006) holistic person–context interaction theory, and the Ford and Lerner (1992) and the Gottlieb (1997, 1998) respective developmental systems formulations. All these instances of developmental systems models emphasize that the basic process of human development involves mutually-influential relations between the developing individual and the multiple levels of his/her changing context. These bidirectional relations may be represented as individual \leftrightarrow context relations. These relations regulate (that is, govern) the course of development (i.e., its pace, direction, and outcomes). When these “developmental regulations” involve individual \leftrightarrow context relations benefitting both the person and his or her ecology, they may be termed “adaptive” (Brandtstädter, 1998, 1999).

History, or temporality, is part of the ecology of human development that is integrated with the individual through developmental regulations. As such, there is always change and, as well, at least some potential for systematic change (i.e., for

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plasticity), across the life span (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006; Lerner, 1984). This potential for change represents a fundamental strength of human development. Of course, plasticity means that change for the better or worse can characterize any individual's developmental trajectory. Nevertheless, a key assumption of relational developmental systems theories – and, as we will note, of the use of these theories to understand both adolescent development in general and to frame the Positive Youth Development (PYD) conception of developmental processes more specifically – is that the developmental system is sufficiently diverse and complex for some means to be found (by researchers and/or practitioners) to couple individual and context in ways that enhance the probability of change for the better, of promoting more positive features of human development (Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009; Lerner, 2002, 2004). Given the enormity of the individual and contextual changes characterizing the adolescent period, and the fact that, in adolescence, the individual has the cognitive, behavioral, and social relational skills to contribute actively and often effectively to his or her own developmental changes (Lerner, 1982; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981; Lerner & Walls, 1999), adolescence is an ideal “ontogenetic laboratory” for studying the plasticity of human development and for exploring how coupling individual and contexts within the developmental system may promote positive development during this period.

The study of adolescence within the developmental system

Multiple dimensions of profound changes are prototypic of the adolescent period. These changes involve levels of organization ranging from the physical and physiological, through the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, to the social relational and institutional. As already noted, plasticity represents a fundamental strength of the adolescent period (Lerner, 2005, 2009), in that it reflects the potential that systematic changes may result in more positive functioning. Indeed, if adaptive developmental regulations emerge or can be fostered between the plastic, developing young person and features of his or her context (e.g., the structure and function of his/her family, school, peer group, and community), then the likelihood will increase that youth may thrive (that is, manifest healthy, positive developmental changes) across the adolescent decade.

Indeed, predicated on relational developmental systems theory, the links among the ideas of plasticity, adaptive developmental regulations, and positive development suggest that all young people have strengths that may be capitalized on to promote thriving across the adolescent years. For instance, one example of the emerging strengths of adolescents is their ability to contribute intentionally to adaptive developmental regulations with their context (Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007a, 2008). Such intentional self regulation may involve the selection of positive goals (e.g., choosing goals that reflect important life purposes), using cognitive and behavioral skills (such as executive functioning or resource recruitment) to optimize the chances of actualizing ones purposes and, when goals are blocked or when initial attempts at optimization fail, possessing the capacity to compensate effectively (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002).

Other instances of strengths are specific self regulations in key contexts of adolescents, for example, school engagement (Li, *in press*; see too Geldhof, 2011). Still another example of youth strengths may be their beliefs and emotional structures pertinent to their futures (Schmid, et al., 2011). For instance, having a hopeful future orientation would energize the activation of the self-regulatory skills of youth, even in the face of challenges to their opportunities to contribute to the adaptive developmental regulations requisite for positive development.

Simply, because of the convergence of the ideas of plasticity, adaptive developmental regulations, and thriving it is possible to assert that all young people constitute “resources to be developed” (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Increasingly, this strength-based view of adolescents has been used to study youth development within the United States (e.g., Lerner et al., 2009) and internationally (e.g., Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007b; Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007). This research has been framed at a “meta-level” by the ideas of individual \leftrightarrow context relations. These relations are the core focus within relational developmental systems models (Overton, 2010), and constitute the view of the PYD developmental process used by Lerner, Lerner, and colleagues (e.g., Lerner, et al., *in press*) in their research about adolescence development. It is useful to explore in more detail the nature of the PYD developmental process as envisioned within this approach.

PYD as developmental process: a focus on individual \leftrightarrow context relations

All current theoretical conceptions of the PYD developmental process have been framed within the relational developmental systems meta-theoretical perspective (e.g., see Damon, 2004; Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2009; Lerner et al., *in press*). While sharing this common emphasis, there are several different instantiations of this general approach to specifying the nature of the specific processes reflecting thriving. The research in the 4-H Study of PYD, a longitudinal study involving American youth from across the United States, focuses on the emergence of PYD through individual \leftrightarrow context relational processes.

Derived from the relational developmental systems ideas that all adolescents have strengths, for instance, by virtue of the plasticity that exists within the developmental system, and that there are “strengths” that exist in the ecology of youth (the ecological developmental assets discussed by Benson, Scales, Hamilton, and Sesma, 2006), Lerner, Lerner, and colleagues have conducted longitudinal research – the 4-H Study of PYD (e.g., Lerner et al., 2005) – that involves, at this writing, about 7000 adolescents from 41 of the United States and seeks to identify the individual and ecological relations that may promote thriving and that, as well, may have a preventive effect in regard to risk/problem behaviors. Within the Lerner and Lerner approach (Lerner et al., *in press*), thriving is seen as the growth of attributes that mark a flourishing, healthy young person,

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