Sometime ago, while I was in seminary, my husband and I entertained some friends for dinner. One of our guests asked me, what on earth got me excited about being in seminary. This got my wheels turning. Pretty easily, I responded, "I want to enable people to become all that God created them to be." This desire has fueled and propelled my work as both a minister and a research psychologist, as I have sought to understand and teach others what enables people to live meaningful lives and fulfill their potential.

Consequently, as a doctoral student, the positive youth development movement was a natural fit. In the mid 1990's I championed the new paradigm amongst my professors, fellow students, and family foundation members. Now, as a faculty member and minister, I do research and teach on the topic. Part of my work, particularly as a member of the Forum on Thriving[1], has been to further understand-what's the "positive" in positive youth development? How is my understanding of what is positive for young people different from another person's opinion, and how do we know who's right? To this end, I have sought to explore some of the theoretical roots of the movement.

It is no wonder that understanding young people in terms of assets rather than deficits has struck a cord with scholars, practitioners, and politicians. Those studying or working in the field of development have recognized that viewing and treating youth as problems waiting to happen, rather than as resources to be developed, has not contributed to positive outcomes in young people. Consequently, with much gusto those in the field have turned to exploring models of development that focus on what can go right with young people. Not surprisingly, publications and programs based on such concepts as resiliency, competency, human strengths, developmental assets, and positive psychology have burgeoned in the past decade.

Despite the growing enthusiasm over the concept of positive development, little attention has been given to constructing a theoretical model for understanding optimal youth development[2]. What has evolved is a plethora of work studying adequate achievement in domains of development (e.g. competency) and the importance of recovering normal levels of functioning in the face of adversity (e.g. resiliency). However, this work does not examine development that results in human functioning that is optimal or better than baseline. Don't we want to see all young people thrive and flourish, rather than just do okay? In addition, much attention has been paid to creating a positive psychology and a psychology of human strengths, yet this realm of work is deficient of a developmental perspective that gives insight into the unique issues and opportunities of different ages and stages in life. Furthermore, scientists have generated lists of indicators of positive development, but these lists generally lack any theoretical orientation. Despite all the excitement about being "positive," for the most part theoretically grounded discussions are lacking to explain or give meaning to what is meant by "positive." No doubt, understanding what puts the "positive" in Positive Youth Development-both theoretically and empirically-is an exciting field of inquiry.
Being the researcher and minister (in other words "geek") that I am, I think it is helpful for scholars and practitioners of PYD alike to think conceptually about the theoretical foundations of positive development. In this piece I offer up some concepts already established within developmental psychology that provide a foundation for understanding the complexity of thriving. It is important to pause for such reflection, as I believe deeper understanding of thriving and positive youth development has the potential to lead to deeper transformation in the lives of young people.

From my perspective, thriving refers to an understanding of development that emphasizes optimal, not adequate development. It is a developmental concept that aims to understand how a young person changes and grows for the eventual betterment of that child and society over time.

Specifically, the foundations that guide my conceptualization of thriving include understanding optimal development:

1. within the multiple contexts in which young people live;
2. as a holistic process that involves the whole person;
3. as a developmental concept;
4. as a process, not a set of benchmarks;
5. as value-laden or prescriptive; and
6. as involving both positive and negative aspects of growth.

One cannot understand if a young person is thriving without taking the contexts or environments in which they live into consideration. We would not expect a young person in East Africa to thrive in the same way as an adolescent from Silicon Valley. Although they may have some qualities in common, others would vary. A definition of positive development must be formulated with reference to the characteristics, resources, and restrictions of the individual considered and the social, cultural, physical, and historical contexts in which he or she lives. Youth do not grow up in a test tube. We cannot study, serve, or love them as they do. In order to care for them most effectively, we must consider the complexity of their worlds—their family, friends, neighborhood, ethnicity, beliefs, even the music that they listen to. Consequently, thriving necessitates understanding a young person in view of the contexts in which they are embedded.

The thriving process embraces all of a person's life including the biological, psychological, behavioral, and even spiritual aspects of being human. Can a young person be thriving if they are excelling in one area of their lives—say academics or the arts, but are severely depressed? This holistic perspective raises the issue of balance. In a culture that does not reward balance, but into extremes, enabling young people to attain a balance of competencies, character, and life satisfaction can be a challenge. In addition, this integrated perspective of thriving emphasizes the need to understand the attitudes and motivations behind behaviors. It is important to differentiate what is actually positive from what merely appears to be positive. For example, altruistic appearing behaviors, may often be motivated by ignoble or selfish motivations.

Foundational to an understanding of thriving is that it occurs throughout the lifespan. Development is not confined to stages within childhood but continues throughout life. Such a developmental approach requires a framework that accounts for change and growth, and needs to
include indicators of optimal development that are appropriate for different stages of the life
cycle. For example, a thriving middle schooler will look different from a senior in high school.
Thriving is not necessarily linear or consistent. It may involve spurts of growth or periods of
stagnation or even regression. More importantly, it involves what a person does with these
different experiences. For some individuals, thriving is evidenced at an early age, for others
thriving may be more obvious in adulthood. Ultimately, a thriving person is on a path to a
hopeful future.

Thriving is more the study of becoming than the study of being. In other words, it is based on
process and change over time rather than on benchmarks. When discussing the concept of
thriving with a group of adolescents—they pleaded, "Please do not give us another thing we have
to be graded on!" There is no Thriving SAT. There is no cut off score that ensures thriving or
separates surviving from thriving. Rather, thriving is a dynamic perspective of development that
takes into consideration how a young person adapts to their environment, grows through the
good and bad of life, and strives to reach their own potential. Thriving looks at how one
actualizes their own potentials, capacities, talents, meaning, and satisfaction in face of the
resources and challenges they have at hand.

Furthermore, thriving is not merely limited to human resourcefulness and the ability to adapt, but
it also includes the important notion of whether or not a young person contributes to the common
good. Positive youth development is not just about individual development, but it is about
enabling a young person to transcend their own personal concerns to improve societal
circumstances. This specifically involves nurturing young people's moral lives and their civic
engagement and commitment. Thriving not only refers to personal growth and well-being, but
also to making an active contribution to society.

Although thriving is a theoretical orientation to positive development, we cannot overlook the
important role of the negative. No doubt, development is often spurred on in the face of adversity
or loss. In discussing the paradox of well-being, Ryff writes that "strength is often fired in the
crucible of adversity" (Ryff & Singer, 2003). Research and writing on resiliency demonstrates
the strength of the human spirit, where young people not only survive, but often thrive, despite
difficult circumstances. Thriving involves the ability to eventually draw upon internal and
external resources to adapt and find even unexpected growth in the face of adversity. In addition
to negative circumstances potentially providing fertile ground for development and thriving,
negative appearing behaviors can also be an element of thriving. For example, "giving up" can be
seen as a human strength. Although perseverance and tenacity are important, modifying goals
and changing directions based on realistic assessment of personal and available resources can be
a good and healthy decision. In addition, individuals often develop various behaviors or
attributes such as coping skills in order to survive or maybe even to thrive in certain
circumstances. Consequently, although thriving refers to positive and optimal development, it
includes growing in and through adversity.

Thriving surely is a complex concept. It involves more than a checklist of competencies and
attitudes. Although the positive youth development movement is relatively new, these tried and
true developmental concepts discussed here remind us that the movement has deep roots within
the field of psychology. As we strive to enable young people to thrive, it is imperative that we
keep these basic developmental concepts in mind in order to provide and care for young people most effectively. We cannot judge or evaluate if a young person is thriving if we do not consider them in the context of the environments in which they live, if we do not see them as a whole and developing person. We must recognize how they are adapting and fulfilling their potential and understand if they are personally growing as well as contributing to something beyond themselves. Ultimately, the members of the Forum on Thriving have said that a thriving young person is on their way to a hopeful future, living their life in such a way that nurtures their own growth, fulfilling their potential, and enables them to contribute to the common good. To this end I labor, research, and teach-hoping to enable young people to thrive as well as equip other adults to do the same.

Footnotes

[1] The Forum on Thriving is a group of youth development researchers, practitioners and thought leaders convened by Thrive Foundation for Youth who gather biannually to further an understanding and practice of thriving.

[2] No doubt important theoretical contributions to our understanding of thriving and positive youth development have been made by scholars such as Peter L. Benson, William Damon, and Richard M. Lerner. Please see references for further resources.

References and Resources


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