Experiencing positive and healthy youth development may be particularly challenging in the face of abrupt, major, rapid, or nonnormative ecological changes. Aligning individual youth strengths and ecological assets may promote youth thriving in the face of these changes.

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Promoting positive youth development in the face of contextual changes and challenges: The roles of individual strengths and ecological assets


Contemporary developmental theory is framed by relational developmental systems models that emphasize that change across life occurs through mutually regulative relations between individuals and their contexts (represented as individual ←→ context relations). Within these models, all contextual levels are involved in these individual ←→ context relations, including the institutions

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of society, culture, the designed and natural environment, and history (temporality). Given that temporality is the superordinate contextual level, the “arrow of time” permeates all other levels of organization within the developmental system. As such, social change is not only a ubiquitous but a necessary feature of the relational developmental system.

When individual ←→ context relations are beneficial to both individual and context, they may be termed adaptive developmental regulations. The goal of developmental science is to describe, explain, and optimize intraindividual changes in adaptive developmental regulations, as well as interindividual differences in such relations, across life.

In adolescence, adaptive developmental regulations involve aligning the developing strengths of plastic youth with the features of their complex (multilevel) and changing worlds. Experiencing positive youth development (PYD) may be particularly challenging in the face of social changes marked by abrupt, major, rapid, or nonnormative ecological variation. In the context of such social changes, practitioners and policymakers may find themselves particularly uncertain about what will have a high probability of promoting adaptive developmental regulations.

Recent research on PYD indicates that there may be specific instantiations of both “sides” of the individual ←→ context relation that, when integrated systematically across adolescence, promote thriving among diverse youth. The research that documents the nature of these relations and their links to PYD is derived from several theoretical models of the PYD process. However, all models reflect relational developmental systems conceptions. We discuss one example of this theoretically predicated research base, data derived from the 4-H Study of PYD. We use this study to note how instances of individual strengths and ecological assets combine to increase the likelihood that youth will become productive and actively engaged citizens. We point to implications for research and applications aimed at increasing the likelihood that the diverse young people of our world will thrive in the face of social changes present in the ecology of human development.
**4-H Study of PYD: Examining individual and context relations within a PYD model**

The 4-H Study was designed to test the relational developmental systems idea that youth will develop positively when their strengths are aligned with the resources that exist in their ecology. In turn, positive outcomes of such development (for example, community contribution and active and engaged citizenship) will be more probable and risky and problem behaviors less probable. Figure 10.1 presents the model used to guide the hypotheses tested made through the 4-H Study. As shown in the figure, PYD is operationalized by the five Cs of competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring, and the development of these Cs is linked to youth community contributions (the “sixth C” of PYD). The figure indicates as well that the five Cs and community contributions are embedded in a relational developmental system that has as its broadest level the ecology of human development. As noted, the arrow of time cuts across all levels depicted in the figure, including the ecology of human development. Thus, social change in this ecology is signified by this feature of the figure.

The study began in 2002 with the collection of data from about seventeen hundred fifth-grade U.S. youth and about eleven hundred of their parents and employs a version of a cohort sequential longitudinal design. Across eight waves of the study, we surveyed 7,071 youth (59.9 percent female) in forty-two states, along with 3,173 parents. The sample varied in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family structure, rural-urban location, geographical region, and program participation experiences.

**Focusing on youth strengths**

All tests of the PYD model presented in Figure 10.1 have involved assessments of the strengths of youth and the assets in their ecology. Nevertheless, to describe the results of these tests and point to the implications of these results for understanding the challenges for youth thriving in the face of abrupt, major, rapid, or nonnormative ecological changes, it is useful to focus on research that
Figure 10.1. The relational, developmental systems model of the individual ←→ context relations involved in PYD used by Lerner et al.

foregrounds either youth strengths or ecological assets. In the 4-H Study, we operationalize youth strengths though the assessment of general, intentional self-regulation (ISR) skills, school engagement, and orientation for a hopeful future.

**Intentional self-regulation.** We operationalize ISR using Baltes and colleagues’ selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC) model. In the 4-H data set, higher SOC scores are consistently associated with higher scores on both PYD and community contribution among boys and girls, both within and across time. In turn, higher SOC correlates with lower scores on risky and problem behaviors such as delinquency. Mueller and colleagues also used data from grades 8, 9, and 10 to better elucidate the processes through which youth ISR and ecological resources promote healthy development, such as out-of-school-time (OST) programs, and contribute to thriving. Results indicated that while self-regulation skills alone predicted PYD, both self-regulation and YD program participation predicted contribution.

**School engagement.** The key expectation framing the study of school engagement is that this context-specific instance of self-regulation should covary positively with PYD and negatively with measures of problem and risky behaviors. Li and Lerner developed a tripartite measure of school engagement that involves behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components. They assessed the links between school engagement, ISR, teacher and peer support, and positive and problematic development among youth in grades 5 and 6. School engagement was higher in youth with more individual and ecological assets, and these high levels of school engagement predicted more academic achievement.

Li and Lerner also found evidence for diverse trajectories of behavioral and emotional school engagement across grades 5 to 8 and for the importance of these different pathways for behavioral and emotional outcomes. Trajectories reflecting higher school engagement were positively associated with grades and negatively associated with delinquency, depression, and substance use.

**Hopeful future expectations.** Given that goal-directed behaviors, emotions, and cognitions can inform young people’s
pathways to adulthood by influencing decisions made in the present, hope about the future was conceptualized as another indicator of youth strengths. Among youth in grades 7, 8, and 9, ISR and having a hopeful future were positively associated with PYD and youth contribution and negatively associated with depressive symptoms and risk behaviors. In turn, hopeful future expectations and ISR were reciprocal in their influences across grades 7 and 8; however, the magnitude of the relationship indicated that earlier hopeful future expectations had greater influence on later SOC scores.

_Focusing on ecological assets_

In addition to focusing on adolescents’ strengths, the 4-H Study identified ecological assets that could be measured independent of youth perceptions or reports (“objective” ecological assets) and assessed the functional significance of these assets.

_Measuring ecological assets._ Theokas and Lerner identified four domains of ecological assets in the families, schools, and communities of fifth-grade youth: individuals in the lives of youth, physical and institutional resources present in the social environment, collective activity in the context (for example, mutual engagement between community members, parents, youth, school personnel, and institutions of society), and the accessibility of contextual resources. Scores for these four domains of developmental assets were significantly related to both positive and problematic outcomes in expected directions. In all contexts, assets associated with individuals were associated with high PYD and the lowest levels of risky and problem behaviors.

_Functional significance of ecological assets for PYD._ Living in asset-poor and asset-rich neighborhoods moderates the effects of adolescent involvement in OST activities on positive and negative developmental outcomes among adolescents. The relation between activity involvement and neighborhood assets was different for girls than it was for boys. That is, girls in low-asset communities, especially girls with high self-regulation, benefit from OST involvement (for example, they have higher PYD
scores); these relations were not present among boys. Furthermore, in examining the role of assets in the family, school, and neighborhood in differentiating trajectories of goal optimization and delinquency in youth from grades 5 to 11, Bowers and colleagues found that collective activity in the family best predicted membership for five goal-optimization trajectories, while school-based assets differentiated the four delinquency trajectories.

**Conclusion: Enhancing the lives of youth in a global society**

Across the findings derived from the 4-H Study, two key themes emerge pertinent to the model shown in Figure 10.1. First, this research points to the integrated role of personal characteristics and ecological assets in promoting the development of:

- PYD
- Youth contributions to their communities
- Characteristics of the individual reflecting risky or problematic features of behavior and development

Second, characteristics of the individual and the context are related to scores pertinent to adaptive development. While these individual ←→ context relations may be linked to interindividual differences in intraindividual change reflecting either positive or problematic development, the goal of developmental science is to identify the individual ←→ context relations that optimize the probability of positive, healthy developmental outcomes. Silbereisen’s work is of great use here. His scholarship points to the challenges of youth experiencing positive development in the face of social changes reflecting abrupt, major, rapid, or non-normative ecological variation. Findings from the 4-H Study that are pertinent to the model of PYD presented in Figure 10.1 depict social change through the action of time across all levels of
organization within the relational developmental system. Silbereisen’s work and the findings of the 4-H Study combine to suggest that to increase the chances that youth will thrive in the face of the challenges associated with dynamically changing contexts, researchers should identify what the strengths of youth are, in relation to what the ecological resources are, maximize the changes of what are the positive developments; and minimize the probability of what negative developments there are in the context of what the features of social change are. Using answers to such complex nuanced questions, practitioners may then formulate, enact, and evaluate evidence-based programs. Such programs may identify in important ways the means requisite for strong and engaged youth and supportive contexts to coalesce to maximize the chances that diverse young people will thrive, even in the face of global social change of unknown magnitude and directions.

Notes


8. Lerner et al. (2005).

9. For a detailed description of the study, see Lerner et al. (2005).


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