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THE 4-H STUDY OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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THE 4-H STUDY OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Members of the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development at Tufts University. Front row, left to right: Jacqueline Lerner, Megan Kiely Mueller, Jennifer Agans, Mimi Arbeit, Kristina Schmid, Michelle Boyd, Amy Alberts Warren, and Michelle Weiner. Back row, left to right: Paul Chase, Edmond Bowers, and Richard Lerner.

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 relational, developmental systems theoretical models (Overton, 2010); conceptions that seek to describe, explain, and optimize mutually influential relations that exist between the developing individual and his or her complex and changing context. 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 (e.g., Damon, 2004; Larson, 2000; Lerner, 2009).

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 (Lerner, 2006). Thus, there is a potential to change the course of development in every adolescent. According to the PYD perspective, there are also strengths that exist in the ecology of youth. For instance, 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, & Sesma, 2006; Theokas & Lerner, 2006). 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 (J. Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009).

The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development was designed to test the idea that when the strengths of youth are aligned with ecological assets, PYD, which is operationalized by the Five Cs of Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection, and Caring, will occur (Lerner et al., 2005). Furthermore, given that positively developing youth should be involved in adaptive developmental regulations (i.e., mutually beneficial individual and context relations), we hypothesized that youth with higher PYD scores should demonstrate higher levels of the “Sixth C” of PYD, Contribution, that is contributions to one’s self, family, community, and civil society (Lerner, 2004). Supported by funds from the National 4-H Council and the Altria Corporation, the 4-H Study began in 2002, with the collection of data from about 1,700 fifth grade youth and about 1,100 of their parents. Because it uses a form of cohort sequential longitudinal design (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade, 1977; Collins, 2006), the 4-H study has grown to include about 7,000 youth and about 3,500 of their parents from 41 states. At the time of this writing, the study is concluding its eighth wave of data collection, which assesses youth in Grade 12. Participants reside in rural, suburban, and urban areas in different parts of the country and represent a diverse set of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds and a range of socioeconomic levels.

Because of the design of the 4-H Study and the large sample size, the 4-H data set affords a unique opportunity to assess the nature, bases, and import of the development of thriving in adolescence with more waves of data than are currently available in any other data set pertinent to PYD. The survey was designed to measure a variety of individual characteristics of youth, including behavioral and cognitive strengths such as whether a young person could select positive life goals, optimize what he or she needed to achieve those goals, and compensate for obstacles that stood in the way of goal attainment (i.e., we have measured the selection, optimization and compensation, or SOC, components of intentional self-regulation; Freund & Baltes, 2002). In particular, we studied career goals – and, as well, school achievement – related to science, engineering, and computer/technology. We also assessed involvement in OST activities, parent-child relations, and active and engaged citizenship (AEC) among youth, a construct that has behavioral, cognitive, and socioemotional components. We assessed sexual behavior and engagement in activities such as exercise and healthy eating. In addition, we appraised engagement in risk/problem behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, bullying, and the presence of depressive symptoms.

Across more than 40 empirical publications to date, the study has yielded important information about the bases and implications of PYD, information that can help launch

young people into healthy and productive lives. Some of the key findings from the study to date are:

- PYD, as measured by the Five Cs, is linked to a “Sixth C”, youth Contribution, which refers to adolescents’ contributions self and to their families, schools, and communities.
- The strengths of young people – their internal developmental assets – can be measured by three characteristics: Selection of goals; Optimization, or developing strategies and means for reaching one’s goals; and Compensation, that is, overcoming obstacles in the face of failure or blocked goals.
- We have identified four ecological assets present in the families, schools, and communities of youth. These are individuals, institutions, collective action, and access to resources in one’s context. In each setting, individuals are always the most important asset!
- Across adolescence, PYD occurs when the strengths of young people are aligned with the ecological resources for healthy development present in their communities.
- Youth Development (YD) programs constitute key ecological assets promoting PYD. YD programs are effective in promoting PYD when they are marked by the presence of the “Big 3,” that is: 1. Sustained, positive adult-youth relations; 2. Life skill building activities; and 3. Youth participation and leadership.
- Contrary to prior beliefs, there is more than one pathway for PYD. We have identified several distinct trajectories of PYD, Contribution, and risk/problem behaviors. For example, even youth at the highest levels of PYD and contribution show risk and problem behaviors
- Using the SOC measure (Freund & Baltes, 2002), we have found a relationship between intentional self-regulation skills and youth development program participation, in predicting youth PYD and Contribution (Mueller et al., in press).
- Youth from families with low maternal education and low household income may benefit more from being focused, or selective, with their goal investments (e.g., by focusing on one goal at a time). Youth from families with high levels of maternal education and income may benefit more from investing their energies in multiple goals (Napolitano, 2010).
- Findings from Grades 7 through 9 show that youth who have hopeful expectations for the future in Grade 7 are more likely to have higher PYD and Contribution scores in Grades 8 and 9. Scores measuring adolescent’s hopeful future expectations also predict membership in the highest developmental trajectories of PYD and Contribution, and in the lowest trajectories of risk and depressive symptoms (Schmid et al., 2011).
- Overall news media use contributed significantly to the prediction of both civic efficacy and civic participation among 8th graders (Boyd, 2010). As well, among 8th to 10th graders, news media use predicted civic duty, civic efficacy, neighborhood social connection, and civic participation via an indirect effect of communication with parents about politics and current events (Boyd, Zaff, Phelps, Weiner, & Lerner, in preparation).

The findings of the 4-H Study continue to be used widely by youth program professionals. For example, we are currently evaluating a tool that mentors in youth-serving organizations may use to assess and develop the SOC skills of their mentees in order to promote PYD. Such impacts on application move the 4-H Study towards its chief objective: To provide strong scientific evidence about actions that may be taken to enhance the lives of the diverse young people of America.

Conclusions

We are often asked by our colleagues within SRA how we had the opportunity to conduct such a large-scale study. It is useful to reflect on two key ingredients. First, you need courageous, committed, and visionary funders. Therefore, we would like to thank Don Floyd, President and CEO of the National 4-H Council, and the Altria Corporation for possessing this courage, commitment and vision. Second, you need a talented and motivated research team. Rich Lerner, as PI of the project, and Jackie Lerner, as its Scientific Director, are deeply grateful for the talented colleagues, doctoral students and post doctoral fellows who have worked on the project. These current and past colleagues include: Mona M. Abo-Zena, Jennifer Agans, Jason Almerigi, Pamela Anderson, Mimi Arbeit, Aida Balsano, Rumeli Banik, Deborah Bobek, Ed Bowers, Michelle J. Boyd, Cornelia Brentano, Aerika Brittan, David Casey, Paul Chase, Kristen Fay, Steinunn Gestsdóttir, Sarah Hertzog, Helena Jeličić, Heidi Johnson, Sonia Isaac Koshy, Selva Lewin-Bizan, Yibing Li, Alicia Doyle Lynch, Lang Ma, Maria McNamara, Dan Miller, Megan Kiely Mueller, Christopher Napolitano, Sophie Naudeau, Isla Pageau, Marie Pelletier, Jack Peltz, Nancy Pare, Erin Phelps, Dee Pratti, Dave Richman-Rapheal, Kristina L. Schmid, Lisa Smith, Christina Theokas, Jennifer Brown Urban, Amy Alberts Warren, Dan Warren, Michelle Weiner, and Nicole Zarrett. In addition, we are fortunate to have a superb Scientific Advisory Board for the 4-H Study. Chaired by Alexander von Eye (Michigan State University), other members of this group are: Dale Blyth, Lynne Borden, Constance Flanagan, Suzane LeMenestrel, Daniel Perkins, Michael Rovine, and Linda Jo Turner.

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