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Jacqueline V. Lerner  
and Janette B. Benson



# ADVANCES IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND BEHAVIOR

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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## Preface

Interests in the strengths of youth, the plasticity of human development, and the concept of resilience coalesced in the 1990s to foster the development of the concept of positive youth development (PYD). Several different models of the developmental process believed to be involved in PYD have been used to frame descriptive or explanatory research across the adolescent period. However, all of the models of the PYD process reflected ideas associated with relational, developmental systems conceptions of human development. Accordingly, a key goal of this volume is to present the features of the relational, developmental systems theoretical model of the PYD process and through the several chapters included in this volume, to describe the breadth of contemporary scholarship pertinent to understanding and promoting PYD.

Relational, developmental systems theory stresses that mutually influential relations between the developing individual and his or her complex and changing ecology (represented as individual  $\leftrightarrow$  context relations) provide the fundamental process of human development. Because humans are embedded in ecologies that change constantly with time (history), these individual  $\leftrightarrow$  context relations may change as well; as such, there is always the potential for systematic change, or plasticity, in human development. Plasticity represents, then, a key strength of human development, and because adolescence is a period of profound individual and ecological change, one may be optimistic that if the strengths of youth are aligned with resources in the ecology that can nurture or support positive change (termed “developmental assets”), then all youth may be placed on a more positive path across adolescence.

This optimistic idea is the key hypothesis of the PYD perspective, and the relational process of development linked to this hypothesis involves the study of mutually beneficial individual  $\leftrightarrow$  context relations (termed “adaptive developmental regulations”) that may result in the thriving of young people across the adolescent years. Thriving has often been operationalized by the development of five positive characteristics among youth—Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection, and Caring—and the development of these Five Cs of PYD has, in turn, been linked to the growth of a young person’s commitment to contribute positively

to his or her context, for instance, through civic engagement. In addition, thriving has been linked to lower probabilities of risk and problem behaviors.

These facets of the PYD developmental process are reflected in the contributions to this volume, contributions that reflect the range of scholarship involved in the contemporary study of PYD. The chapters reflect scholarship that focuses on different components of the PYD process, but nevertheless, all chapters provide evidence about the empirical usefulness of the PYD perspective and discuss how—in the areas of youth development of concern within a given chapter—research consistent with the model has important implications both for future adolescent development research and for the application of developmental science.

For instance, as explained in the opening chapter by Lerner, Lerner, and Benson, the foreground of several chapters in this volume focuses on the strengths that youth bring to the individual ↔ context relations that constitute the basic, relational process of development within the PYD model. Napolitano, Bowers, Gestsdóttir, and Chase discuss the role of intentional self-regulation skills in promoting thriving in adolescence, and in turn, Mariano and Going describe the nature of youth purpose and discuss research that shows that many young people develop their potentialities in conjunction with a positive purpose in life.

Although intentional self-regulation skills and the possession of positive purposes are necessary components of youth contributions to adaptive developmental regulations, they may not be sufficient to assure PYD. Two chapters in this volume address the issue of the motivational characteristics that need to be present among youth for either the use of the self-regulation skills they possess or the actions required to pursue their positive purposes. Schmid and Lopez discuss the role of hope in adolescents' constructions of their futures, of their acting to engage their contexts in ways that place them on pathways toward positive adulthoods. In turn, Larson and Rusk present and evaluate the idea that intrinsic motivation is a powerful engine of development and learning. Without such motivation, youth would only be directed into actions through extrinsic factors, and there would be at best only a low probability that adaptive developmental regulations predicated on purpose and hope would be prominent parts of the developmental repertoire of youth.

When the strengths of youth are used in adaptive developmental regulations, then young people effectively engage their contexts in ways that support both them and their settings. A key setting of youth is schools, and Li describes why, from a relational, developmental systems perspective, focusing on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral school engagement is important for understanding the adaptive individual

↔ context relations that are fundamental to human development. In turn, constructs other than school engagement reflect the dynamic relation between the developing adolescent and the institutions of his or her world. King, Carr, and Boitor note that, across the United States and around the world, a ubiquitous instance of such individual ↔ context relations is reflected in the spirituality and religiosity of individuals. They discuss data that indicate the individual and contextual conditions through which spirituality and religiosity place young people on a thriving pathway.

In turn, many of the chapters in this volume focus on features of the ecology that, in integration with the strengths of the person, create the adaptive individual ↔ context relations that constitute the basic, relational process of development within the PYD model. The chapter by Benson, Scales, and Syvertsen epitomizes this focus. It describes the foundational theory and research of Search Institute about the strengths of both individuals and their ecologies (their respective developmental assets) that foster thriving. One of the key ecological developmental assets identified by Benson et al. is out-of-school-time (OST) programs, and Mueller, Lewin-Bizan, and Urban discuss theory and research that underscores that involvement by youth in OST activities is an asset in the development of youth. In addition, in contemporary society, a growing and seemingly ubiquitous facet of youth activity is engagement with media. The chapter by Boyd and Dobrow reviews the literature that documents the growing presence of the use of media among youth and points to the links among media literacy, PYD, and a key outcome of the adaptive individual ↔ context relations that are associated with PYD, that is, youth community contribution, as exemplified by civic engagement. Consistent with the work of Boyd and Dobrow, Zaff, Kawashima-Ginsberg, and Lin present a model of active and engaged citizenship and explain how this concept integrates motivation to be engaged civically, civic participation, social connection, and self-efficacy in regard to civic contributions. They use a relational, developmental systems approach to argue that information about civic functioning can no longer focus primarily on Western democracies.

Across the chapters in this volume, authors point to the implications of theory and research about PYD for applications to programs or policies. The chapter by Baber and Rainer presents an example of the implementation of a PYD model within an actual program, that is, a therapeutic boarding school, Shortridge Academy in New Hampshire. Baber and Rainer note that the PYD-based ecology present at Shortridge Academy increases the likelihood of greater consistency in students' interactions at school and in their families, and has been shown to promote positive change in the youth.

Finally, across the chapters in this volume, authors have pointed to the importance of research methods that integrate individuals and contexts in manners that may elucidate the individual ↔ context relations fundamental to the model of the PYD process. Innovations in relational and change-sensitive analyses may be required to accomplish such work and, as such, von Eye, Martel, Lerner, Lerner, and Bowers use a study of gender specificity and of longitudinal stability of intentional self-regulation skills to illustrate the nature of such methodological innovations in research about the PYD process.

In sum, the chapters in this volume provide support for the use of a relational, developmental systems PYD model perspective in framing research that enhances understanding of the intricacies of individual ↔ context relations, relations that—when mutually beneficial to both individual and context—put young people on a thriving journey across the adolescent period. Moreover, as readers review the scholarship included in this volume, they will find considerable evidence in support of the ideas that there is a diversity of youth strengths and of ecological developmental assets that may be integrated: to foster PYD; to enhance the likelihood of the contributions of youth, such as active and engaged citizenship; and to decrease the likelihood of risk/problem behaviors.

To the extent that the readers of this volume find its chapters of value they will be indebted, as we certainly are, to the extraordinary scholarship of the colleagues who contributed to this work. Their excellence as developmental scientists and their commitment to conducting good research and application in the service of promoting PYD are contributions that we greatly admire and for which we are deeply grateful.

We are also grateful to the National 4-H Council, the Altria Corporation, the Thrive Foundation for Youth, the John Templeton Foundation, and the National Science Foundation for supporting the scholarship of Richard M. Lerner and Jacqueline V. Lerner during the period in which they worked on this volume. Much of the research they supported is represented in this volume. Much of the research about PYD more generally would not exist without their support.

We are deeply appreciative of the work of the managing editor within the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development, Jarrett M. Lerner. His substantive, editorial, and organizational skills; his capacity to engage efficiently and simultaneously in the multiple tasks associated with the development and production of this book; and his ability to remain cordial and effective with the diverse personalities encountered in academic work are truly extraordinary. His talents enabled this book to move from idea to reality in a very short period of time. We are also very grateful to Jarrett's assistant, Yael Tzipori. She was a creative and

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Finally, we are pleased to express our greatest gratitude to Donald T. Floyd, Jr., president and CEO of the National 4-H Council, to whom we are honored to dedicate this book. Don's vision, values, and courage created the field of PYD research. His leadership moved PYD from being a heuristic concept to an empirically powerful approach to understanding and enhancing the lives of diverse young people in the United States and around the world. We, the scholars who have contributed to this volume, our scientific and practitioner colleagues working in the field of PYD, and literally millions of young people around the world owe to Don Floyd the deepest appreciation for enabling a new conception of young people to be born, to flourish, and to enrich the lives of youth.

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