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## Qualitative and Quantitative Assessments of Thriving and Contribution in Early Adolescence Findings from the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development

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**Abstract:** Research and practice in youth development converge in the study of positive development, or thriving. They converge also in seeking among youth an orientation to act in support of their own and others' well-being.

through contributions to self, family, and community. Based on both qualitative (open and axial coding of parents' and students' responses to several open-ended questions) and quantitative analyses of data (Sixth Grade; 2003-2004) of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, we found that adolescents and parents define a thriving youth in similar ways, and, as well, that the groups differ in the salience of contribution and their respective conceptions of thriving. We discuss the implications for the practice of the two generational groups' contrasting views on contribution.

## Background

Current emphases in both research and practice pertinent to youth development suggest that adolescents have strengths and when these strengths are aligned with the resources for healthy development present within their communities, positive development will flourish (Lerner, 2004; Lerner, et al., 2005). During the adolescent years, exemplary development is as being constituted by psychological, behavioral, and social characteristics reflecting competence, confidence, caring, character, and positive social connections (e.g., Lerner, 2002). When these "Five Cs" develop in a young person, he or she may be seen as thriving youth. A Sixth C, contribution (to self, family, community, and civic life) also develops (Lerner, 2004).

Some youth development organizations, such as 4-H and Boys & Girls Clubs, and their programs help lead a thriving young person toward contribution (e.g., see Roth, 2003b). However, it was not until the launching of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development that empirical evidence was presented for the presence of the Five Cs (as first-order constructs) and their convergence on a second-order latent construct of PYD, and for the presence of contribution (Lerner, et al., 2005).

The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, funded by the National 4-H Council, focuses on the identification of the individual and contextual factors that lead to PYD, and ultimately to thriving (self, others, and community). The study is predicated on developmental systems theory and the potential for plasticity in development across the life span. In this conception, thriving is a function of individual and context relations. Such contributions are envisioned to involve both a behavioral component and an ideological component (that is, the young person's acts of contribution are based on a commitment to moral and civic duty) (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). These contributions should contribute to self and context and who act on these beliefs reflect and promote their own development, as well as the "health" of their social context. This is theoretically consistent with the person and context developmental regulations.

While theory and preliminary data suggest the importance of youth contribution, there is a need to determine the extent to which youth and parents value contribution as a central component of thriving. Certainly, if young people and their parents do not regard contribution as a central component of thriving, theories linking PYD and contribution would be deficient in their ecological validity. Practitioners placing emphasis on the development of contribution as a key goal would not fit well with the interests of their clientele if the enhancement of contribution is not of interest to youth and parents.

Of course, parents and youth can and do respond to quantitative questions about the salience of indicators of contribution (e.g., Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1999; Scales, et al., 2000). Nevertheless, such quantitative data do not necessarily reflect the salience of constructs relevant to contribution in the conceptions held by adolescents regarding the meaning of a thriving young person. Accordingly, qualitative data are needed for an assessment of the unprompted salience of contribution and, through triangulation,

assessing the ecological validity of emphases in both theory and practice on the in defining and acting to promote positive youth development, respectively.

Accordingly, in the present study we sought to:

- First, use qualitative information available in the 4-H Study of PYD data to assess the salience of constructs related to contribution and to the "Five Cs" of PYD in adolescents and parents about the nature of a thriving young person.
- Second, because past research has revealed that indicators of PYD vary in relation to socioeconomic status (SES) (e.g., Fredricks & Eccles, in press; Lerner, et al., 2005), the covariation between participants' sex and SES, and youth identification with family, and community when describing a thriving youth.
- Third, the research assessed whether the evidence about youth contribution and engagement through qualitative analyses could be triangulated with quantitative data.

## METHODS

The current investigation was conducted as a part of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD) which is a longitudinal investigation starting with 5th grade youth in the United States. The 4-H study is designed to test a theoretical model about the role of development in the promotion of PYD, as conceptualized by the "Five Cs" of PYD (competence, confidence, character, and caring), the "sixth C" of contribution, and the corresponding dimensions of behaviors (Lerner, et al., 2005). Full details of the methodology of the 4-H Study are in prior reports (Lerner, et al., 2005; Theokas & Lerner, in press; also see Jelenc, et al., 2005), we present those features of methodology pertinent to the focus of this investigation.

### Design

The 4-H Study uses a form of longitudinal sequential design (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitz, 1980) with sixth graders, gathered during the 2002-2003 school year (Wave 1 of the study), and a new cohort of sixth graders who are in the current grade level of the initial cohort; this new cohort is then followed longitudinally throughout the rest of the study.

Accordingly, in Wave 2 of the study (sixth grade for the initial cohort), a retest cohort of sixth graders who were new to the study were gathered; these youth became members of the Wave 2 cohort. Similarly, each subsequent wave of the study introduces a new cohort of sixth graders longitudinally throughout the rest of the study.

The present report provides data from the second wave of the 4-H Study and, in addition, details of analyses involving two different subsets of the overall set of study participants. The sample of sixth graders includes participants from the initial cohort who remain in the sample for Wave 2 and the new cohort of sixth graders, who were introduced in the Wave 2 retest control group. Details about these groups of participants are provided below.

### Participants

The Wave 2 sample was comprised of 982 sixth grade youth from the initial Wave 1 (54.4% females) and, as well, a "retest control" sample of 893 sixth graders (31.4% females). The combination of longitudinally studied (Wave 1-Wave 2) participants and the retest control participants from Wave 2 resulted in a total of 1,875 sixth graders (42.6% males; mean age = 12.18 years, SD = .87 years; 57.4% females; mean age = .80 years). Wave 2 participants came from sites located in 18 states across the United States and varied in regard to race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family structure, rural/

region, and experiences in after-school programs (Lerner, et al., 2005). School method for collecting the sample.

For the present report we focused on a subsample ( $N = 691$ ) of the overall Wave 2 given our interest in comparing youth and parent conceptions of thriving, the sample participants we used consisted of all adolescent responses for whom we had matched

### **The Student Questionnaire (SQ) and the Parent Questionnaire (PQ)**

As mentioned above, the measurement model used in the larger 4-H Study of Family and Community Engagement (FCE) included indices that would test the developmental contextual, individual and contextual models of Positive Youth Development (PYD). Accordingly, the SQ included measures pertinent to the "Five Cs" of PYD: (a) youth's current pubertal level of development, individual and ecological assets, developmental assets, and (b) parent and family demographics. The PQ was composed of two types of items: (a) items about the youth and (b) items about the child. Information regarding the specific items included in the questionnaires is found in Lerner, et al. (2005).

In regard to the present research, youth and their parents responded to open-ended questions to appraise self-generated definitions of thriving in adolescence. In addition, youth provided quantitative measures of contribution and PYD, which were used for the purpose of triangulating qualitative data on these constructs. The SQ and PQ qualitative questions are described in "Coding of qualitative data". Information about the quantitative measures of PYD is presented in Lerner, et al. (2005).

### **Procedure**

For Wave 2 of data collection (2003-2004), teachers or program staff gave children home to their parents, which contained a letter explaining the study, consent form for the parent questionnaire, and a self-addressed envelope for returning the parent questionnaire. For youth who were unable to be surveyed at their school or 4-H site because they were either absent or unable to be tested, or because the school superintendent did not allow Wave 2 testing to be conducted via a survey in the mail. Parents were asked to complete the Parent Questionnaire and return it via mail.

### **Coding of qualitative data**

The foci of the present research were pursued through analyses of qualitative data that were available within the 4-H Study data set. Across both youth and parents, the coding of qualitative data base required the development and implementation of a system of coding questions.

Youth responded to four open-ended questions:

1. Everybody knows kids in their school or neighborhood that they think are doing well in all areas of your life. In your opinion, what is he or she like? What sort of things does he or she do?
2. Everybody also has an idea about how she or he would like to be. If you were to be like that, what would you be like? What sorts of things would you do?
3. Now, think about yourself and your life now. How would you describe how you like? What sorts of things do you do?
4. What do you think is the most important/meaningful thing that you do?

Youth answers were coded by two raters through a combination of open coding (identifying concepts within the data) and axial coding (i.e., relating categories to their sub-categories). While raters did create codes for data not captured by a pre-coded

framework, coding predominantly reflected the general concepts used in the PYD of competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and the sixth C, content was based on recent work by King, et al. (2005), who found that definitions of PYD were able to be organized according to the "five Cs" of PYD. A preliminary coding scheme was developed by two raters based on the answers provided by 75 randomly selected participants.

To ascertain coding reliability across the raters, each rater used this preliminary code on an additional 75 randomly selected cases. There was a 91.26% agreement and a high Cohen's kappa,  $k = .92$ . Given this consistency, the remaining youth cases were coded by one of the two raters.

Parents responded to the following qualitative questions: How can you tell if a youth is doing really well in all areas of their lives? In your opinion, what is he or she like? What does he or she do? Unlike the youth participants, parents were only asked one question to capture their definitions of thriving. This decision was based on adults' general knowledge and relative capacity to provide succinct answers, as well as the need to keep the questions relatively short.

Parents' answers were also coded by two raters through a combination of open coding. Again, the two raters created codes reflective of concepts used in the PYD literature. Codes were developed for data not captured by this preconceived theoretical framework. A preliminary codebook based on the answers provided by 100 randomly selected parents was developed. Inter-rater reliability was determined for a random sample of 100 cases. There was a high agreement between the two raters and a high Cohen's kappa,  $k = .88$ . Given this consistency, the remaining parent answers were coded by one of the two raters.

## RESULTS

The goals of this study included:

- To assess through using qualitative data from the 4-H Study the unmet needs of youth related to contribution and to the "Five Cs" of PYD in the conceptions of a thriving youth about the nature of a thriving young person
- To assess the association between participants' sex and SES and the likelihood that adolescents mentioned contribution to self, family, and community when asked about thriving
- To assess whether qualitative data could be triangulated with quantitative data on youth contribution to community and PYD.

Accordingly, the first analyses of the open-ended questions asked of parents are to determine whether parents and youth define thriving in similar or different ways. Youth contribution was a salient component of either group's conceptions of a thriving youth.

### Is contribution part of adolescents' or parents' conceptions of a thriving youth?

Throughout this study we examined two questions: First, "What is the prevalence of youth who mention contribution to self, family, and community as a part of thriving or as a part of that youth do?" Second, "Do parents and students define thriving in similar or different ways?"

Table 1 presents the percentages of parents/guardians and youth who mention contribution and other attributes of youth development in answering the open-ended questions. Parent/guardian and youth proportions that significantly differ are in bold in Table 1. A selection of parent and youth quotations illustrating codes associated with the youth attributes of youth development.

**Table 1**

*Proportion of Parents or Guardians and Youth who Mentioned the 'Contribution, and Other Attributes of Youth Development in their Det*

Codes		Proportion of sample t once
		Parents or Guardians
The "5 Cs" of PYD and Contribution		
	<b>Competence (all sub-codes)</b>	<b>34.9</b>
	Competence: academic	19.3
	Competence: other (e.g., social)	22.8
	<b>Confidence</b>	<b>7.2</b>
	<b>Connection</b>	<b>25.4</b>
	<b>Character</b>	<b>14.1</b>
	<b>Caring</b>	<b>6.0</b>
	PYD (computed as the sum of Cs)	52.0
	One C	24.7
	Two Cs	20.1
	Three Cs	6.2
	Four Cs	0.9
	Five Cs	0.1
	<b>Contribution (all sub-codes)</b>	<b>13.6</b>
	Contribution to self	7.3
	Contribution to family	2.6
	Contribution to community	5.0
Participation in activities		
	Sports	18.5
	Arts and crafts	2.6
	Dance/music/singing/drama	6.7
	Many different activities	5.2
	Movies/TV	2.0
	Outdoors	3.9
	Play/have fun (includes "hanging out")	7.5
	Reading/writing	4.2
	Youth development	1.1
	Go to school/learn	0.0
Other youth attributes		
	Absence of negative behaviors	0.7
	<b>Professional/educational aspirations</b>	<b>1.4</b>
	Active	5.2
	<b>Bright/smart</b>	<b>1.0</b>
	Communicative/open	13.6
	Curious about new things	4.5
	Sense of humor	2.9
	Positive attitude/orientation to life	7.0
	<b>Happy</b>	<b>23.6</b>
	Positive orientation to school	3.6
	Religiosity/spirituality	4.4

\*These parent/guardian and youth proportions are significantly different. All  $z$  s  $\rho$ s are  $<.01$ .

**Table 2**

A Selection of Parent or Guardian and Youth Quotations that Illustrate Attributes Associated with the "Five Cs" of PYD and Other Attributes of Youth

Codes	Responses	
	Parent or Guardian	Youth
Competence	"Like to balance both his academic and physical activities so that he doesn't burn out at a young age."	"I would balance everything"
Competence: academic	"Involved and successful academically, socially, and physically in school."	"I'd study grades and sports"
Competence: other (e.g., social)	"They are well-liked and move easily in circles of friends."	"I would try to be liked by everyone."
Confidence	"An adolescent is happiest when they are comfortable with themselves."	"I would be confident"
Connection	"Parents are involved with their activities."	"Have a good family."
Character	"Respectful and courteous to those he interacts with including friends, teachers, and family."	"I would try to be a good person"
Caring	"Is interested in the feelings and the well being of others."	"Really caring about a good person"
Contribution to self	"He eats well and enough rest and physical activity."	"I would be healthy."
Contribution to family	"Helps out with chores at home."	"I would be a good brother."
Contribution to community	"Serves or gives back to community."	"I would help make a difference"
Professional/educational aspirations	"He is determined to get his education, so that when he grows up, he will be successful."	"Going to college getting a good job"
Bright/smart	"Has a good head on her shoulders."	"I think she is smart"
Happy	"They are generally happy and satisfied with themselves and the world around them."	"At school happy."

The data in these tables show that parents and youth indeed differ in what they describe as a thriving youth. Within both, the parent group and the youth group, competence was most commonly mentioned. However, a greater number of youth included the "Cs" of competence, connection, character, and caring in their definitions of a thriving youth. Youth were also more likely to mention professional/educational aspirations and the personal characteristic of being bright/smart (21.3%) than were their parents.

respectively). In turn, although less frequent than youth in their use of terms Cs, parents thought a thriving young person was someone who was happy (23.6%). Contribution to self attribute exceeded the frequency with which youth used this term (i.e., 3.9%).

However, of particular importance for the present research, the data in Table 1 show a substantial disparity in the proportion of parents (13.6%) and youth (42%) who mentioned contribution to community. As measured within the present research, it appears then that contribution to community is as much more salient an attribute of a thriving young person than is the case among parents when parents did mention contribution as a facet of a thriving youth they were describing (7.3%), while youth focused most on contribution to community (42%).

These findings suggest that the emphasis among researchers and practitioners on contribution to community corresponds more with views of what characterizes a thriving youth among youth themselves than by their parents. It is important to ask, however, given that previous research has demonstrated sex and socioeconomic status (SES) effects for youth contribution to community (Lerner, et al., 2005), if these youth-parent differences vary also in relation to the person or his or her SES.

In regard to sex, boys and girls did not significantly differ in their views about contribution to community. However, the proportion of girls who mentioned contribution to family at least once was significantly higher than was the proportion of boys,  $\chi^2(1) = 6.06, p \leq .014$ . Similarly, the proportion of girls who mentioned contribution to community at least once was significantly higher than the proportion of boys,  $\chi^2(1) = 9.98, p \leq .002$ .

SES was measured through parental report of household income and was dichotomized (below the median [\$45,000] and above the median). Youth with low SES were more likely than youth with high SES to mention contribution to family at least once,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.06, p = .044$ . Significant differences were found between the two groups in regard to contribution to community,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.06, p = .044$ .

In short, then, contribution to community, when measured through qualitative analyses, appears to be a salient feature of thriving in the views of youth, and perhaps - in regard to some youth - especially for girls and in lower SES groups, than is the case for parents. Do the findings from qualitative analyses converge with analyses of quantitative data? The answer is yes.

### **Do qualitative data triangulate with quantitative data about youth contribution to community and PYD?**

Establishing the convergence between qualitative and quantitative assessments for validating one's findings and, as well, for deriving recommendations for practice, contribution to community can only be addressed within the youth sample, since quantitative measures of contribution to community and PYD were not included within the Parent Questionnaire.

Youth scores on the quantitative measure of contribution to community were significantly correlated with youth mentioning contribution to community as a part of their responses to the Parent Questionnaire,  $r(603) = .095, p = .02$ . That is, the two measures (i.e., qualitative and quantitative) of contribution to community significantly covary.

Analyses also revealed significant, albeit small, relationships between quantitative measures of contribution to community and PYD.

Youth scores on the quantitative measure of PYD were significantly correlated with youth mentioning contribution to community in their definitions of thriving,  $r(662) = .264, p < .01$ . This correlation between quantitative measures of PYD was significant for both males and females,  $r(266) = .252, p < .01$ , respectively. The PYD measures were also significantly correlated with youth mentioning contribution to community in their definitions of thriving,  $r(396) = .252, p < .01$ , respectively.

and low SES youth,  $r(355) = .300, p < .01$  and  $r(235) = .133, p < .05$ , respect

## Discussion

Theories of positive youth development (PYD) and practitioners' efforts to promote converge in emphasizing that the outcome of a young person's growth through when that young person is involved in programs aimed at fostering PYD (Lerner Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, 2003b), should be contributions to self, family, community society. If both, theory and the goals of practice are to find support, then it is people who participate in youth development programs - both parents and their key outcome of participation in youth development programs are such multifaceted They would then agree that a thriving young person should manifest not only to well, the attribute of contribution (to self and context) (Lerner, 2004).

The results of the present research indicate, however, that parents - as key clients programs - do not share in what seems to be a convergence among researchers themselves in perceiving a thriving young person as either possessing attribute: Cs" or as making multi-faceted contributions to self and context. Through the information within the 4-H Study of PYD (Lerner, et al., 2005; Theokas, et al., 2002) assess the unprompted salience of constructs related to contribution and to the conceptions of adolescents and parents about the nature of a thriving young person included characteristics associated with the Cs in their definitions of thriving young parents. Parents placed an emphasis on the thriving young person as happy and with at least one C), competent. Moreover, youth were much more likely to express their conceptions of a thriving young person than were parents. When parents associated with contribution, they were more likely to focus on contributions to keeping healthy) than contributions to the context (i.e., family or community). The results suggested that some variation exists across sex and SES, this variation does not show generational differences.

Moreover, since the qualitative findings about contribution from the present research quantitative data about contribution available for youth within the 4-H Study do not provide evidence for the validity of our findings and thus for the assertion that there are no implications of our results for both theory and practice.

Researchers believe that to promote both the "Five Cs," as key indicators of PYD, the key "outcome" of the development of these attributes of a thriving youth, there should be support across the breadth of the social ecology of youth (Theokas & Lerner, 2002). If developmental assets represented by other people - for instance, parents, teachers, and youth-serving programs - should converge in building a collaborative community (Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Theokas & Lerner, in press). In turn, practitioners in youth-serving programs want to be in accord with the values of the parents of their youth.

Accordingly, given the results of the present research, practitioners may need to consider a conceptualization of a thriving youth with those of the parents they are serving. If "good things" for youth, there are differences in how "good" is understood and if resources of time and money are limited, these different ideas may result in divergence. In turn, researchers should investigate how the sources of theory, practice, and research converge, why there is divergence with the views of parents, and whether and how among all groups can serve to benefit the overall healthy development of youth.

The present findings pertain only to the early portion of the adolescent period. If replicated and, as well, extended to subsequent portions of adolescence, then the agenda for collaboration among researchers, practitioners, parents, and young

must build a more collaborative community for promoting positive development people of our nation.

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