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Introductory Chapter

Addressing Social Justice within the Positive Youth Development Framework

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Introduction

Consistent with the PYD perspective, all young people have strengths that can be harnessed to enhance their development if aligned with a supportive and nurturing environment (Lerner et al., 2017). Benson (2007) argued that when asset-building societies and asset-building communities in youth contexts have social norms, policies, programs, and behaviors that support and nurture resources and opportunities, young people do not only thrive, but they are also less likely to engage in risk and problem behaviors. Moreover, youth who are thriving are also those who tend to contribute to societal development (Lerner et al., 2017). Consequently, creating and giving youth equal access to resources and opportunities will assist in addressing social injustice and equity issues existing between and within different groups and clusters of youth.

Due to their present and future contribution to community, national and ultimately global development, youth across the globe constitute a significant unit of their respective national population. Investing in youth will therefore mean economic growth and social stability at different levels of society. However, earlier research and reports indicate that the resources and opportunities available to youth are unevenly distributed across and within countries and contexts. These differences are reflected in indices, such as the Youth Development Index (YDI; Commonwealth Secretariat, 2021) and Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI; World Economic Forum, 2023).

As a measure used in tracking progress on the sustainable development goals associated with youth development, YDI reflects six developmental domains that are all important precursors to social justice: Education; Employment & Opportunity; Health & well-being; Equality & inclusion; Political & civil participation; and Peace & security (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2021). Alternatively, GGGI measures the prospects of females relative to males in four key domains: Economic Participation & Opportunity; Educational Attainment; Health & Survival, and Political Empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2023). These global indices indicate that Western countries, with their economic and technological advancement, are generally doing better on youth developmental indicators, while within countries, males have more access to resources and opportunities for development. Other reports reveal how minorities tend to have limited access to available resources related to education, health, and documentation (United Nations High Commissioner

for Refugees, 2023). Notably, globalization and digitalization have brought about rapid changes in society, contributing to an increase in social inequalities and tensions between communities and identities. The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to accelerating social polarization phenomena, increasing social inequalities, and psychological distress, especially among young people (Venkatesh et al., 2021). Based on this evidence, it appears that many young people living in the so-called majority world, in general, and females and minorities in particular, are lacking the needed nurturing environment that will enable them to develop their full potential.

In the subsequent sections, we provide a summary of the conditions and development of different samples of young people living in countries across the globe and discuss how these could have implications for social justice and equity. The publication is a collection of chapters that originated from papers presented at the 1st Conference on Positive Youth Development in a Cross-national Perspective. The virtual conference was held in April 2022 and hosted by the University of Bergen, Norway. With a conference theme on "Bridging Research & Practice Cross-Nationally: A PYD Approach to Social Justice", the chapters provide insights into how Positive Youth Development (PYD), as a strengths-based approach (Lerner et al., 2023), can be used to address issues pertaining to social justice and to advocate for equity among young people from diverse backgrounds. Reiterating Lerner and colleagues (2021), we refer to social justice as a situation where every youth, irrespective of their background characteristic or location, is equipped with the necessary resources and opportunities for growth and development. While some authors of the chapters did focus on markers of social justice, others reflected on how their findings could have implications for the subject matter.

Highlights from the Book Chapters

The book encompasses this introductory chapter, nine full chapters, and a commentary. The nine full chapters featured in this book are published as a protocol, experimental, theoretical, or empirical studies, using cross-sectional or longitudinal designs. These chapters reflect the voices, perceptions, experiences and developmental outcomes of adolescents and emerging adults from countries located in four continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, and South

America. The location as well as the PYD expertise and opinions of authors of the chapters mirror the diverse countries and continents represented in the different studies. The following provide some highlights of the chapters.

Within PYD research, questionnaires or survey tools reflecting the 5Cs of PYD (i.e., competence, confidence, connection, character and caring; Geldhof et al., 2014) and the Developmental Asset Profile (Benson et al., 2011; Syvertsen et al., 2021) have been used extensively to assess developmental outcomes as well as the personal strengths and contextual resources of young people in different countries, cultures, and contexts. Published as a protocol, *Asgarabad et al.* in chapter 1 propose an outline of a systematic review and meta-analysis of studies using various versions of the 5Cs of PYD questionnaires that have been developed and applied over two decades. Specifically, the authors aim to assess, summarize, and synthesize studies, considering the general and cross-cultural measurement properties (e.g., validity, reliability, responsiveness, and interpretability) of different 5Cs questionnaires. This task is to be able to make evidence-based judgements on the strengths and weaknesses of the scales to conduct valid, reliable, and rigorous research in the future. The chapter also provides a much-needed background for the methodologies of the subsequent chapters.

In chapter 2, *Djuarsa et al.* conducted a study to identify the level and formation process of the 5Cs among 76 lecturer assistants attending university in Indonesia. Using a mixed-method approach, the authors first asked the participants to fill out a questionnaire containing items on the 5Cs and followed that up by interviewing five students from the sample. Findings from the quantitative study indicated medium to high levels of the 5Cs among the lecturer assistants, with mean scores on character and caring being the highest. For the qualitative study, the participants reported that activities such as providing feedback to peers and juniors improved their competence and self-confidence. In addition, helping peers to resolve tasks enhanced their caring skills and character. Working professionally as a lecturer assistant also made an impact on their respect for ethics and responsibility.

In chapter 3, *Vrdoljak et al.* also did a study on the 5Cs to examine how these thriving indicators were associated with family and school factors, such as parental monitoring and school climate in a Croatian sample. Using cross-sectional data collected from 3559 students attending public schools (54% girls; M_{age} = 15.12, *SD* =.39), the authors found that boys were more likely to report higher levels of confidence, competence, and connection, while girls

scored higher on caring and character. In regression analysis, both parental monitoring and school climate were significantly associated with the 5Cs, although the latter appeared to have the strongest association. School climate was also found to be a significant mediator of the association between youth disclosure (a subscale of parental monitoring) and the 5Cs.

In chapter 4, a cross-sectional study involving a sample of 1044 emerging adults (75.5% females; M_{age} = 20.47, *SD* = 3.08) from 11 universities in Spain was conducted by *Gomez-Baya and colleagues* to investigate the associations between the 5Cs and indicators of social contribution and pro-environmental behaviors. Their findings indicated that among the 5Cs, caring was the most reported indicator, while competence was the least. In addition, the 5Cs as one composite score was positively associated with both social contribution (especially family contribution and advising peers) and pro-environmental behaviors like buying local food, having planted trees, and heating with solar energy. Furthermore, thriving indicators, such as connection and character had the strongest associations with social contribution, while character and caring had the strongest associations with the pro-environmental behaviors. These findings are important when considering the promotion of thriving and contribution among adolescents and emerging adults, although future studies may need to consider the influence of other variables (e.g., gender and socio-economic status).

In chapter 5, where several indicators of PYD among young people in Peru were assessed, *Manrique-Millones et al.* collected cross-sectional data from 503 participants (60% females; M_{age} = 19.7, SD = 3.9) to explore the associations between developmental assets (depicting internal assets like social competencies and positive values along with external assets like support and empowerment), the 5Cs and indicators of mental health. Their descriptive analysis showed lower scores on assets, such as positive identity and constructive use of time, and relatively higher scores on commitment to learning, and expectations and boundaries. Via structural equation modelling, the authors observed a positive association between developmental assets (both internal and external) and the 5Cs, as well as a significant association between the 5Cs and mental health. In addition, the 5Cs as a composite variable was found to mediate the association between developmental assets and mental health. Despite these encouraging findings, the authors propose extending the assessment of the different PYD indicators among youth in this South American region, perhaps accompanied by a more qualitative and integrative overview.

In chapter 6, *Olurin and colleagues* explored the developmental assets of youth, who were recruited from institutionalized residential centers (IRC: $n = 122$, $M_{age} = 19.10$, $SD = 3.15$) and institutionalized non-residential centers (INRC: $n = 487$, $M_{age} = 16.52$, $SD = 1.46$) in Nigeria. The authors also examined possible gender and age differences. Their findings indicated that in both centers, commitment to learning was highly experienced, while constructive use of time was the least experienced asset. Gender differences were frequently observed in IRC, with males reporting higher scores on several of the assets relative to females. In INRC, females reported higher scores on three assets compared to males. For age differences, emerging adults reported higher scores on four developmental assets relative to children in IRC, while in INRC, children reported higher scores on six developmental assets compared to emerging adults. The findings suggest that youth in INRC experienced a more nurturing context for positive development compared to youth in IRC, and that males appeared to have greater access to assets than females.

In chapter 7, *Stabbetorp and colleagues* carried out another Croatian study among 424 high school (233 girls; $M_{age} = 16.8$, $SD = 1.21$) and 304 university students (216 girls; $M_{age} = 20.7$, $SD = 1.27$) to investigate the associations between developmental assets and worries about future education, employment, loneliness, and social status. The authors also examined differences in the associations between the two educational stages. Their results indicated that although girls reported higher levels of developmental assets, they also were more likely to report higher levels of future worries, relative to boys. Furthermore, when compared to high school students, university students reported slightly more developmental assets while there was no difference in overall worry across the two educational stages. Moreover, several significant associations were found between the developmental assets and worry. For example, higher levels of developmental assets, such as positive identity, were negatively related to lower levels of future worries in youth, especially among high school students. For external assets, support was negatively associated with worries (in particular, worrying about academic achievement and loneliness) in both high school and university students.

In chapter 8, *Yadegarzadeh et al.* conducted a review to determine the extent to which Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) textbooks in Iran incorporated the 10 basic life skills recommended by the World Health Organization (problem-solving, critical thinking, effective communication

skills, decision-making, creative thinking, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness building skills, empathy, coping with stress and coping with emotions). The authors assessed how these life skills varied across three dimensions of competency (knowledge, skill, and attitude). With a multi-method approach, documentary research was used to extract themes, the Delphi method to prioritize the themes, and content analysis through Shannon's entropy method was used to examine the themes about life skills. Their findings indicated that at the level of knowledge as well as skill, problem-solving received the most attention, while at the level of attitude, most emphasis was allocated to critical thinking. Thus, it appears that less attention has been paid to intraindividual skills, such as self-awareness and coping with emotions, in textbooks in Iran.

Finally, in chapter 9, *Danielsen et al.* carried out a study to investigate how gender, socio-economic status (SES), and immigrant background related to the developmental trajectories of academic initiative, academic self-efficacy, and grade point average (GPA) throughout upper secondary education in Norway. Using data collected from 1508 general education students (60.7% girls; mean age at T1 = 17.00, *SD* = .91), the results from latent growth curve modelling indicated group differences related to changes over a three year-period (2016–2019) in GPA, but this finding was not observed in academic initiative or self-efficacy. Furthermore, girls reported greater improvement in GPA when compared to boys, while students with a high SES recorded a larger improvement in their GPA relative to students with a low SES. The results also showed that immigrant youth in Norway experienced a greater improvement in their GPA compared to their non-immigrant peers.

Positive Youth Development Research and Social Justice

Adopting Hamilton's (1999) tripartite view of PYD, Lerner et al. (2021) described how PYD conceived as a theory of youth development, a frame for program design and as an example of specific youth development programs can be used to address social justice. These three perspectives hinge on a dynamic interaction that is supposed to take place between young people and their contexts if the goal is to advance PYD. Thus, while access to more developmental assets in the same (vertical pile-up) and across different

domains (horizontal stacking) is necessary to ensure thriving and positive development (Benson, 2007), an optimal alignment between youth strengths and their contextual assets is crucial. To ensure this optimal alignment, the meaning and measurement of PYD and its determinants that tend to differ across youth ethnicity, SES, immigration status and other background characteristics (Geldholf et al., 2014; Spencer & Spencer, 2014) would need to be considered in rigorous research in common with the assessment of existing tools (see *Asgarabad et al.*).

While extending research on the PYD perspective outside US contexts, where much of the work in the field has been done, the findings reported in the book chapters reflect the unique conditions of the different contexts, countries and continents exemplified in the book, as well as the significance of other PYD-related factors (see *Yadegarzadeh et al.* and *Danielsen et al.*). Across countries and contexts, it appears that young people are more likely to report personal strengths compared to contextual resources or they only report higher levels of a few PYD indicators (e.g., *Manrique-Millones et al.* and *Djuarsa et al.*). In addition, when gender differences were studied, males in general experienced more of the developmental assets relative to females (*Olurin et al.*), although in countries with relatively high GGGI the situation of females appeared to be better (*Stabbetorp et al.*). Moreover, in terms of the 5Cs, males tended to report more of the efficacious-related Cs (competence and confidence) while girls reported more of the social-emotional Cs (caring and character). Despite these differences, PYD indicators were found to enhance thriving, well-being, and contribution among different samples of young people (e.g., *Gomez-Baya et al.* and *Vrdoljak et al.*).

The theoretical assumption, along with the empirical support of the PYD perspective, suggests that both personal strengths and contextual resources are necessary facilitators of PYD. Indeed, the interaction between micro- and macro-level factors is a core principle in relational developmental systems models (Overton, 2015) on which PYD builds. Most importantly, how these factors at the different levels of youth ecology interact to meet the developmental needs of diverse youth within and between contexts can have some implications for social justice and equity.

Moreover, diverse groups of youth may need diverse combinations of strengths and resources, depending on several factors, including the conditions and culture of their contexts. For instance, while a youth in Nigeria may

need caring and connection because these are more adaptable in his or her collective cultural context, a youth in Norway may need competence and self-confidence due to the expectations for autonomy and self-sufficiency in his or her individualistic cultural setting. While these specifications are important to note, the PYD perspective proposes that thriving is not just possessing one or two of the Cs or developmental assets, but that all Cs or asset categories are needed to facilitate a healthy transition into adulthood and hence youth participation and contribution. Investigating how other PYD resources can be introduced to youth in different cultures and countries may help address social injustice, not just within countries, but across countries as well.

Conclusions

In many countries, such as the seven represented in these book chapters, policies have been formulated to further the growth and development of young people. While this is an important step forward, several of the policies are yet to be implemented or rather, implemented well. Indices like YDI and GGGI reveal that many countries are not doing well in their empowerment and inclusion of the youth. In the implementation of the policies, working together with other stakeholders at different levels of youth ecology may help maximize efforts while empowering youth with essential personal and contextual resources.

In the conference call for participation, we were interested in creating an arena where experts who work within a PYD framework in relation to research, intervention and policy making would collaborate to bridge research and practice and ultimately contribute to building a more just society for young people and for all. The chapters in this conference book are a way to communicate our continuous interest. To create a just world for young people and for all, social justice and equity across ethnicity, immigrant status, socio-economic status, gender, and other background characteries, would all need to be considered in this collaboration network for PYD. Equally important will be the involvement of the voices and choices of the youth themselves, as echoed in the commentary chapter of this book. As stated in the commentary, the experiences and views of youth can contribute to the understanding of where to direct our scientific attention. As youth face growing global challenges as

well as possibilities that include everything from global poverty to artificial intelligence, they will need to be fully prepared and fully engaged; for it is only then that they can play their role as responsible adults as well as join in the contribution to this more just society.

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