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Commentary

## The Global Study of Positive Youth Development: Implications for Time, Urgency, and Social Justice

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Conducting research about and/or with adolescents opens up the chance to consider time. Some facets of time that can come up are:

1. Adolescence as a developmental period
2. Adolescence as a scientific field with its own history and future
3. How historical events and conditions are important to shaping the development of adolescents and societies alike
4. How experiences and views can be shared and/or differ across generations

Historically, research about adolescence (points A and B above) has leaned towards an overemphasis on documenting what is dysfunctional, maladaptive, and/or dangerous about adolescents, i.e., adolescent storm and stress (Hollenstein & Loughheed, 2013). The tendency towards documenting storm and stress persists to some degree in science and society, even though there are many empirical examples that indicate that a severe, universal, and inevitable storm and stress during adolescence is not typical for many youth (e.g., Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Göllner et al., 2017; Hollenstein & Loughheed, 2013). As noted by Russell (2021) in an address to the Society for Research on Adolescence, "... science has the potential to challenge or to reinforce social norms and cultural frameworks for understanding adolescence" (p. 9). Further reflecting on what science can offer, Russell (2021, p. 7) stated, "Sometimes we conduct science for the sake of knowledge itself. But more important in this space of what we need to know are the everyday needs of adolescents as understood from their perspective... or the real-life practice and policy questions that research could address, but that remain unexplored."

Positive youth development (or PYD) is a field of scientific inquiry that 1) is relevant to children, adolescents, and emerging adults, 2) encompasses the development of interventions that have promotive aims, and 3) involves the creation and testing of theories that explain how strengths and resources (what is promotive and beneficial) develop over time within a variety of persons and contexts, and seeks to explain how strengths and problems relate to one another in a diversity of youth and contexts (Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021). The use of a PYD perspective provides a valuable alternative to a storm-and-stress view of adolescence and opens up possibilities for a holistic and simply more realistic view of young people and their lives. Thus, PYD is a fitting perspective given that it has the capacity to encompass what is needed in order to

make the study of adolescence truly global and to ensure that what we learn is relevant and helpful to the world's youth.

## The Importance of Listening to Youth

The digital revolution is playing a pivotal role in amplifying young people's voices on a global scale (Keeley & Little, 2017). Indeed, adolescents and emerging adults are the age groups that are most digitally connected (Keeley & Little, 2017). Adolescents today are able to share their experiences and concerns with a global audience, offering caregivers, researchers and policy makers greater insight into their lives in real time. Moreover, through informal channels such as social media, digital news, online educational resources, and online communities, young people are increasingly aware of what is happening in the world and have access to an unprecedented amount of information with potential to enhance their ability to independently explore the issues affecting their well-being (Keeley & Little, 2017). Thus, it is not surprising that digital tools are increasingly being used by young people to gain knowledge about issues of importance to them as well as to advocate for change locally and globally. To our knowledge, there are no robust comparative studies that concern the size and scope of digital activism among youth globally. However, there is considerable evidence from a number of smaller-scale studies of the different ways in which young people seek out information, resources and opportunities for support, as well as engage in civic activities online (e.g., Cho et al., 2020; Percy-Smith et al., 2023; Stoilova et al., 2021). Listening to the real-world experiences of young people, understanding the rapidly changing contexts in which they live, and engaging them in the research process is central to the development of interventions that are responsive to their needs, culturally sensitive, effective and inclusive.

Take as a case in point, *U-Report*, which is an open-source digital tool that supports young people to navigate the digital landscape and contribute directly to policy change, provides an example of a global platform that has succeeded in bridging research with policy and practice through youth engagement (UNICEF, 2021a). Currently operated in 68 countries by UNICEF and local partners, the platform features anonymous participation and real-time analysis of young people's voices, covering a wide range of topics in a variety of innovative ways (e.g., youth views about and information sharing about risk perception during

the COVID-19 pandemic, mental and physical health, gender-based violence, and climate change; UNICEF, 2021a). The U-Report initiative demonstrates how actively involving young people from diverse cultures and backgrounds in the research process, from problem identification to data collection and analysis, can strengthen the relevance, ownership and impact of interventions (UNICEF, 2021a). As noted by Siry (2015, p. 162), “A central part of participatory approaches to research is that children should be recognised as the experts that they are; as they are experts on their own lives.”

## **This Volume**

As a part of an effort to nuance, emphasise and expand what is known about PYD from a global standpoint, this volume makes clear contributions by reflecting the PYD perspective from different theoretical standpoints (e.g., the Five Cs, developmental assets), as well as offering insights into other indicators of thriving that connect the PYD field to other similar spirited theories and evidence bases such as those that concern: life skills and academic self-efficacy. Some contributions to this volume advance our understanding by making an empirical comparison between different theoretical perspectives (see Manrique-Millones and colleagues’ study from Peru); such empirical investigations are much needed to advance the field. Viewed as a whole, the contributions to this volume are varied in terms of the research methods employed including the use of quantitative and/or qualitative methods (see the chapter by Djuarsa and colleagues for a mixed-method study about Indonesian emerging adults).

The volume also presents contributions that vary in the research designs used, including several cross-sectional studies and an experimental study. Other contributions are unique in that they seek to focus particularly on work that will improve PYD measurement cross-nationally and culturally (i.e., a protocol for a systematic review on PYD scales, see the contribution by Asgardabad and colleagues), as well as an innovative curriculum analysis from a life skills standpoint (see the contribution by Yadegarzadeh and colleagues about the curriculum of Iranian vocational high school students). Further, some contributions examine associations between strengths and problems (e.g., the chapter by Stabbetorp and colleagues from Croatia). This variety in subject matter and approaches offers the reader a deeper appreciation of

the many ways in which strengths, resources, and adaptation are reflected in the everyday lives of young people. The empirical contributions in this volume represent the views and life experiences of adolescents and emerging adults living in Croatia, Indonesia, Iran, Nigeria, Norway, Peru, and Spain. In some cases, the researchers involved in carrying out this work belong to multinational research teams, with collaborators from the nations mentioned above as well as Turkey and the United States.

All contributions to this volume emanated from the 1<sup>st</sup> Conference on Positive Youth Development in a Cross-national Perspective that took place virtually in 2022. PYD is a necessary field of inquiry as it encompasses youth in a holistic light (as noted), attends to their everyday life experiences (for an example see contributions by Vrdoljak and colleagues from Croatia on the 5Cs and intersections with parenting and school climate, as well as Olurin and colleagues' contribution about Nigerian youth in different social care contexts), and is well suited to support the present-day generation of youth as they come of age and become the stewards of the multiple pressing global issues (e.g., climate change, striving for equality in society, managing how we relate to digital life including artificial intelligence). Thus, the principles and potentials of PYD have attracted a diverse array of scholars and students from across the globe who in many cases pursue PYD in their home countries and internationally on the basis of their own scientific interest (i.e., science for the sake of knowledge generation and in response to their own societal contexts).

It is also important to note that all contributors to this 1<sup>st</sup> conference and this volume were invited to explore how any aspect of social justice<sup>1</sup> could connect with the research that they presented (at the conference and/or in this

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1 Although social justice was not defined for contributors to the conference and this volume, we begin our consideration of social justice as it was defined by Russell (2016, p. 6) "...as the ability to realize potential in society..." which is closely aligned with foundational ideas and aims of the PYD field. Social justice and its intersection with science implies several other steps, such as reflecting on one's own position as a person and scientist, and being reflective about equality and inequality as they enter into the different phases of research and the communication of scientific findings; taking the person-context interaction seriously by working to document the conditions that youth grow up in, measuring instead of assuming and overgeneralizing; and asking and partnering with youth and adult youth stakeholders to understand what is urgent from their perspectives (Russell, 2016).

volume), even if social justice was not directly measured or studied as part of their empirical contribution. Scholars were invited to explore the implications of social justice to their research from their own standpoint, and thus the considerations in this volume, in some cases, reflect a concern for how to understand what fairness and equity would look like in contexts of youth development (see contribution from Gomez-Baya and colleagues from Spain about the intersections between the 5Cs, contribution, and pro-environmental behaviour as well as the discussion about schools as a potential equalizer in the contribution by Danielsen and colleagues from Norway), and how to better reflect equity in scientific methods and questions posed – in the life situation of participants who live in nations and cultures that have their own histories of power, injustice, and equality and ways of understanding the confluence and development of personal and social identity. Thus, in the contributions to this volume, there are several thoughtful considerations of what aspects of social justice would look like from the vantage point of the contributors, as well as consideration of how equality and inequality are expressed in the conditions and concerns of youth living in various nations. The contributors in this volume who took up this invitation to explore aspects of social justice clearly add to the global discussion about social justice in significant ways, and importantly take steps to widen the social justice discourse in the field of adolescence to include, but also to go beyond, any one country and its history.

The research in this volume reflects a growing sense of urgency in the field of adolescence. Russell (2016, p. 4) argued that urgency should be added to our decision making about what makes research high quality, and defined urgency “...as issues or conditions that influence adolescents’ lives and well-being which demand attention and action”. Returning to the topic of time (i.e., points A through D) and considering points C and D (i.e., history’s importance to societies and individuals as well as intergenerational relations) represent starting places to identify what is urgent from the perspective of today’s youth globally. As an illustration of these possibilities, one can look to the findings of a large-scale, nationally representative survey of youth (15- to 24-year-olds) and older adults (40+) living in 21 nations (approximately 21 000 people in total) conducted by UNICEF (2021b). The 21 nations involved in the study were: Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Cameroon, Ethiopia, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria,

Peru, Spain, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Zimbabwe (UNICEF, 2021b).

The main conclusions from the survey results were that although several multiple global challenges (COVID-19, climate, striving for equality and fairness) were taking place and youth were concerned about their mental health, it was also the case that the youth surveyed were more optimistic about the world and its future, were more likely to see themselves as global citizens, were more positive about what it is like to be a child today relative to the older adults who were surveyed (UNICEF, 2021b). Other key themes for the youth surveyed were the need for the world to take "...significant action on equality for LGBTQ+ people – and decision-makers need to listen to children's voices" (UNICEF, 2021b, p. 7). For example, "...71 percent of young people say it is somewhat or very important to treat LGBTQ+ people equally, versus 57 percent of older people" (UNICEF, 2021b, p. 12). Despite the noted generational differences, there was also indications of generational solidarity, in regard to the need to address climate change and the value of education and hard work as key ingredients of personal thriving (UNICEF, 2021b).

Moving from an expansive multi-national survey with about 21 000 people participating, such as the one conducted by UNICEF (2021b), to the perspective of one individual young person, we can dig deeper to understand why social justice is important for many of today's young people. The quote below from Ruairí Holohan's blog indicates why social justice is an urgent concern in his life and where he places his efforts and goals:

I chose to speak about homophobia and the lack of education in Irish schools about LGBTIQ+ rights because it is a personal issue... As a young gay man, I still fear getting the bus after a certain hour, especially if I am wearing anything too bright, or that would not be worn by the average 'straight lad'. I still get anxious whenever my boyfriend tries to hold my hand in public, because of homophobia... For World Children's Day, I was asked to re-imagine the world post-pandemic. I described a place where I could walk down the street being the person I am when I'm with my friends, in school, performing, because my sexual orientation may be different from others, but that doesn't make me different from other people. I don't want any young person to be the target of hate or disrespect... (Holohan, 2021, November 13, np).

A consideration of social justice in the study of adolescence, including the PYD field, is pressing for a number of reasons, and most plainly because social justice and equality, on a number of grounds, is important to many young people themselves. They have a personal stake in equality because it affects their lives and futures. Today's generation will be faced with existential challenges that impact humanity as a whole and it is vital for today's adult scientists and scholars to invite themselves to consider how youth can be supported and listened to, as a basis to understand where to direct our scientific attention. This means that as scientists, we continue to embrace our existing scientific principles and training that have already taken us so far and yielded so many advances in understanding the world, but we also work to find intersections that make our research relevant and informed by the voices of youth and those charged with their care and well-being.

The present volume moves the PYD field forward by expanding our understanding of youth strengths and/or contextual resources that support youth and emerging adult development as it is experienced in varied parts of the world. A serious consideration of time, social justice, and urgency can also advance the scientific study of adolescence more generally (Russell, 2016) and PYD in particular. The cross-national collaboration on PYD, which this volume is part of, is well positioned to continue to broaden the discourse on these urgent issues from cross-national and cross-cultural perspectives and provide a forum for scientists' engagement in supporting and furthering our understanding of social justice.



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