

This chapter describes a framework for conceptualizing interventions intended to create the conditions linked to positive youth development. These interventions involve strategies designed to enhance either the will or the capacity of individuals, organizations, systems, or communities to change.

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Creating the conditions linked to positive youth development

Robert C. Granger

THIS VOLUME ILLUSTRATES several noteworthy points of agreement among scholars interested in theory and practice regarding successful youth development. This consensus includes the usefulness of developmental system theories, the premium they place on emphasizing and understanding the transactions among developing youth and their ecologies, the intellectual and analytical power gained by considering youth's strengths and assets, and the realization that we have much to learn about the occurrence of all of this in various cultural contexts. There is also an explicit acknowledgment in several of the chapters that we know better how to describe the trajectory of youth development than how to intentionally help youth succeed. This chapter reviews this consensus, suggests that a first-order intellectual question concerns creating the conditions

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linked to successful development, and explores a framework for conceptualizing such interventions.

A convergence of theory, empirical studies, and practice

Prior to the 1960s, most developmental theorists assumed that an individual's developmental potential and patterns were largely set at birth and that the role of the "environment" (including attempts to modify the environment via social policies and other means) was to support the unfolding of genetic endowment. But early studies of environmental influences¹ dramatically suggested the power of the environment, while the seminal writings of J. McVicker Hunt,² Piaget,³ Bronfenbrenner,⁴ and others focused theory and practice on the transactions between and among the developing child and the surrounding ecologies. This volume rests in that tradition.

Configuring relationships and developmental contexts

Moving beyond debate about the relative contribution of various factors that shape development (nature-nurture, the importance of family and peers), developmental system theorists⁵ stress that development occurs in a set of relations among "the multiple levels of organization that comprise the substance of human life."⁶ One implication of this systems approach is that no particular interaction, context, or moment is all important.⁷ Rather, what is important is the configuration of these relationships over time, setting, and developmental stage. Inexorably, this formulation of development draws scholars and persons interested in improving developmental opportunity toward this configuration. How can it be productively changed by policy, education, or other means?

Strengths and assets

As Lerner and colleagues observe (in this volume), a powerful adjunct to developmental systems theory is a focus on the strengths

and assets that constitute and are linked to current and future well-being. Lerner attributes this emerging focus on strengths in part to increased collaboration among scholars, practitioners, and policy makers and a recent National Research Council (NRC) report⁸ makes a similar observation. In simple terms captured by Pittman and colleagues, “problem-free is not fully prepared”;⁹ it is helpful to conceptualize successful development as larger than avoidance of problems. If we are going to intentionally try to create “pathways to successful youth development,” we need to theorize success and its correlates.

As is reviewed in the NRC volume,¹⁰ many theorists have proposed sets of assets,¹¹ including things such as possessing a sense of safety (emotional and physical), social connectedness, a desire to learn and be curious, and a sense of identity and meaning.¹² Many such lists have also been suggested by applied developmental scholars and practitioners.¹³ The lists of important strengths and assets from theory, empirical studies, and practice have much common ground. The National Research Council, for instance, offers a summary derived from theory and empirical studies of programs, families, and other developmental contexts.¹⁴

How universal are the strengths and assets?

It is both theoretically and practically important to ask how universal or culturally specific these statements of important strengths and assets are. Anthropologists¹⁵ and developmental psychologists¹⁶ remind us that the meaning and manifestation of a particular strength—such as good health habits, or confidence in one’s personal efficacy—vary by cultural context. Many authors have noted the need for more empirical work to help us understand how the particulars of strengths and assets or well-being vary by such factors as social identity, gender, place, developmental age, and historical time.

But it also appears, in this volume and elsewhere, that at some useful level of abstraction the various lists of strengths and assets converge. Said another way, thriving may look different according

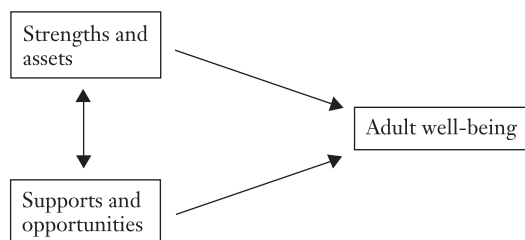
to age and cultural context, but it is a useful way to conceptualize successful youth development more universally.

Conditions linked to positive youth development

As theorists have worked to conceptualize development and its multiple, relational contexts, so too have scholars and practitioners tried to identify (1) the features that characterize productive person-context transactions and (2) positive configurations of such transactions across time and place. In the NRC volume, these are termed “the features of positive developmental settings” and in much of the applied, youth development literature they are described as the “supports and opportunities” that are linked to well-being.¹⁷ As with the statements of strengths and assets, these supports and opportunities vary from one author to the next, but they also have much in common. The NRC volume suggests a set derived from theory and practice; Gambone¹⁸ has summarized the differences and overlap among the taxonomies prominent in practice. Examples of items common to most lists are meaningful and supportive relationships with peers and adults, the opportunity to develop “hard” (academic, task-specific) and “soft” (relational, not job-specific) skills, and predictable limits that are developmentally and situationally appropriate. These supports and opportunities are linked with the well-being of youth, as shown in Figure 7.1.

This simple figure is meant to illustrate the reciprocal, transactional nature of the relationships between supports and opportuni-

Figure 7.1. The relationship among youth strengths and assets, supports and opportunities, and adult well-being



ties and youth strengths and assets. One does not cause the other. Rather, as Lerner, Taylor, and von Eye describe in the Editors' Notes of this volume, healthy development involves positive change in the relationship between a developing person and the surrounding environment. This is the same point made explicitly by Benson and colleagues in their conjoining of internal and external assets in the Search Institute framework.¹⁹ Although it is possible to conceptualize strengths and assets as existing primarily in the person, theory suggests that they are meaningfully manifest only in the transaction between the person and environment.

Creating the conditions linked to positive youth development

Theory and empirical studies in applied developmental science have allowed us to agree on the markers of successful youth development and the conditions linked to it, but the field has done much less to help policy makers and practitioners understand how to intentionally intervene and enhance development. Systems theory describes interconnection of the elements in development, presenting the policy maker or practitioner with many places to start. For the sake of this chapter, the question is understood as, How can we improve the availability and quality of supports and opportunities for young people?

Creating intentional change

Work done by disparate scholars in various disciplines suggests that we have much to learn if we are to create the supports and opportunities young people need to thrive. Perhaps because the conscious focus on environmental influence is relatively recent, so too is the science around (1) societal change on behalf of youth or others (including individual, collective, organizational, and community change), (2) diffusion of social innovation, and (3) the role of evidence in policy making and practice. Prochaska and colleagues²⁰ have contributed theory and empirical work on changing individual

behaviors such as smoking and overeating. Rogers²¹ has for forty years described the diffusion of fairly technical innovation. Weiss²² has analyzed the use of research in policy making. Skocpol²³ and Imig²⁴ have described the evolution of norm-oriented social movements, and various scholars have examined change in such applied settings as employment programs, community-based organizations, communities and neighborhoods, and schools.

Although these various scholars of change rarely cite each others' work, they all tend to work within a stage framework that suggests some period of contemplation of change (for instance, dissatisfaction with the status quo, or a vision that things can be better), initiation of change (most try to understand the factors that shape change and, if change involves adapting practices from another setting, how the practices are adapted to a local need), and institutionalization (determining what sustains change, or how one can take it to scale). This stage model is durable across several fields, although Mayer and Davidson²⁵ note that it is not clear that change is either so orderly or so self-conscious.

Points of agreement regarding intentional change

Reading across these literatures, we find that some lessons and common findings emerge. For example:

- Knowledge about new ways of achieving one's goal is a useful ingredient in planful change, but it is not enough to ensure that change occurs. Knowledge of the efficacy of immunization is not enough to persuade everyone to get one, and knowing about the importance of diet and exercise does not ensure a high-quality version of either.

- We like to learn about new practices or possibilities from people we know or trust. An enduring finding in the summaries of research on the diffusion of innovation by Rogers, this point was underscored in a recent scan of youth practitioners.²⁶ Pittman and Yohalem found that many practitioners and policy makers rely on individuals whom they personally know as a source of "what is known" about research in a given area.

- Change is unlikely to occur without dissatisfaction with the status quo and the knowledge, skills, and resources that support change. That is, change demands both *will* and *capacity* to change. (I return to these two constructs later, in discussing interventions primarily targeted on will or capacity.)

- The more complex and nuanced an issue is (as with almost all the questions concerning how to enhance human development), the greater the need for local ownership and iterative creation or adaptation of possible solutions.

- Interventions that fit existing practice, are seen as an improvement on the status quo, and are relatively simple are more likely to be adopted than interventions that lack these features.

In some sense, this accumulation of findings is promising because it has emerged from a number of disciplines and settings. The work is mostly descriptive, but it has considerable ecological validity in that most of the findings emerge from case studies of actual change efforts.

Recognizing the need for more definite, causal analysis regarding the effect of intervention, within the past twenty years many psychologists (particularly community psychologists) have designed and tested interventions meant to prevent various problems. An example is poor mental health.²⁷ Working within the National Institutes of Health (NIH) “intervention/prevention” cycle,²⁸ this usually involves successive, randomized, controlled trials testing new programs. Interventions are first implemented and assessed in a few places, with a constrained number and composition of participants, to determine if an intervention can make a difference. (This stage of the NIH cycle is known as the efficacy phase.) If shown to be efficacious, the intervention is tested more widely in effectiveness trials to assess its effects under broader conditions and populations.

Even at the effectiveness stage, the trials tend to be tightly controlled. Therefore, they offer only modest assurance that any observed effects created by the intervention can be achieved if it is tried at a scale that would make it common to most youth.

A research tradition that weds the methodological rigor of the NIH cycle with the external validity of descriptive, observational studies of change are the social experiments pioneered by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) in the welfare and employment field.²⁹ Now common in many policy areas,³⁰ this research and demonstration approach uses fully experimental designs to test policy and program intervention in multiple settings with a large number of participants.³¹ This approach generates information that has proved to be credible and useful to policy makers regarding the effects of intervention.³² However, the studies rarely yield information on how to create and institutionalize the intervention in diverse circumstances. The level of implementation is assessed to determine if the intervention got a fair test, but little work is done to explain variation in implementation.³³

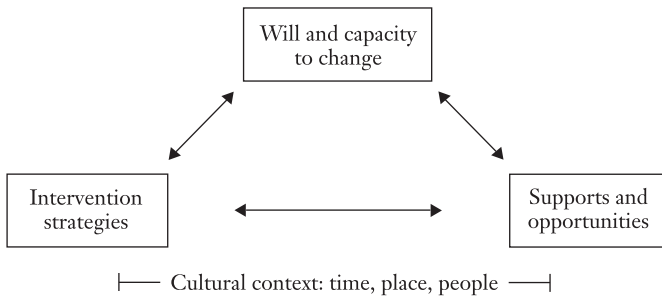
Descriptive and experimental work on change suggests a number of challenges for those interested in building a science of social change.³⁴ First, it could be useful to have a delineation of the strategies interventionists use to create change. Second, it is important to empirically link those strategies to improved supports and opportunities for youth. Third, we need an ongoing program of research that helps us understand how various strategies are linked to, and influenced by, supports and opportunities.

A framework for conceptualizing interventions meant to improve supports and opportunities

In the literature on planned individual, organizational, and systemic change, scholars emphasize will and capacity as the primary mediators of subsequent change. For change to occur, the intervention must influence the inclination or propensity to change (will), the ability to change (capacity), or both.

Figure 7.2 illustrates the relationships among intervention strategies, will and capacity, and supports and opportunities. As with development, the relationships depicted in the figure are seen as a

Figure 7.2. A framework linking intervention strategies to conditions for positive development



system that operates in a particular ecological niche. The primary pathway linking intervention strategy and supports and opportunities passes through the will and capacity to change. The existing levels and nature of will and capacity and supports and opportunities are likely to influence the choice of intervention strategy and the effectiveness of the strategy.

For example, assume that one is trying to influence the diversity and quality of meaningful relationships with adults in the lives of youth. A plausible intervention has to consider the will and capacity of the youth and proximal adults to create such a relationship, promising developmental settings (neighborhood, program, organization) susceptible to intervention, and the resources available for intervention. Having done so, those interested in change might conclude that the problem is primarily one of will and the best solution is use of public policy and various media to change incentives. Conversely, the problem may be understood as mostly one of capacity, with the need for education, training, or redistribution of income to permit different uses of time.

Admittedly, the formulation is abstract, in part because the phrase *intervention strategy* is underspecified. The next section of this chapter offers a start on a list of generic intervention strategies, analogous to the sets we now have of strengths and assets and supports and opportunities. Generated by considering the deeper structure of a number of attempts to influence youth development,

the list is very much a work in progress that needs greater theoretical coherence. Strategies are listed as primarily intended to create the will or the capacity to change, but the distinction is blurred given the reciprocal nature of will and capacity.

Intervention strategies to enhance the will to change

To influence will, in a change effort five intervention strategies are commonly used (often in combination).

1. *Standards.* The standards approach to creating change includes output standards for programs and systems (such as educational standards for a state), design standards (perhaps for a professional preparation program), and equity standards (pushing for equality of opportunity, such as equity laws for school financing). The notion is that a consensus on goals, and benchmarks for those goals, will catalyze change.

2. *Availability of data.* This strategy includes providing data on problems and on areas addressed by standards, such as performance data; funding (equity) data; and data on the accessibility, affordability, and quality of resources such as programs and systems. For example, the Search Institute's work with communities nationwide³⁵ begins with providing data by way of an "assets inventory."

3. *Contingencies related to change.* This approach includes incentives and rewards for change (monetary reward, social recognition) and sanctions and punishments for lack of change (penalties, loss of funding, loss of access to goods and services). In general, this approach is about rewards and accountability for action.

4. *Social pressure.* This category includes such strategies as collective organizing, civil action, voting, and advocacy.

5. *Marketing and "messaging."* This group includes all forms of communication encouraging the need to change or information about opportunities for change (as with presentation of a new frame or persuasion campaign).

Although these five strategies are conceptually distinct, they are almost always used in combination. For example, social pressure and marketing strategies are often focused on the need

for agreed-upon goals; in themselves, social pressure and marketing represent an attempt to change the contingencies regarding change.

Intervention strategies to enhance the capacity to change

Beyond will, the capacity to change is also required. Across interventions, these strategies fall into five approaches that are also commonly used in various combinations:

1. *Human capital creation.* These strategies emphasize education, training, or other ways to change human capital. Common examples are staff and leadership development.

2. *Redistribution strategies.* These are strategies meant to redistribute physical or economic capital for reasons of equity, efficiency, or some other social goal. For example, changing the earned income tax credit is an economic redistribution strategy in that it moves tax dollars from one set of citizens to others, conditioned on income and work.

3. *Investment strategies.* An investment strategy seeks to seed or foster subsequent capacity through an initial investment. Examples are a public subsidy for building a new school or other youth-serving facility, or a grant to allow scholars to form a network of scholars and practitioners.

4. *Social capital creation.* This category of intervention attempts to change the nature, density, and norms of human relationships. Examples are a structural change in a school that creates a smaller “community,” reorganizing a program to get recruiters and direct-service staff together, creation of a new organization in a community, and mentoring.

5. *Efficiency strategies.* These are efforts to improve capacity by means of increased efficiency: service integration, integrated case management, creation of intermediaries to make a “sector” work better, and so on.

As with the intervention strategies focused on will, those emphasizing capacity are often used together. In addition, interventionists tend to focus on a particular developmental context (though

not necessarily using that language). For example, interventions meant to directly affect individual youth are common (for example, expand a program, establish a new policy targeted on individual behavior). But so are interventions aimed at an organization, system, or community.

We can name these intervention approaches, but we know little about them in any way that could guide choices for policy and practice. Rather, we are left to experience “reform du jour,” where a particular approach gains brief popularity, perhaps from poorly understood macro factors such as variation in national prosperity. After a period of time, the predominant paradigm changes, but we are left with little theoretical, empirical, or practical guidance regarding selection and implementation of intervention approaches.

Implications of this analysis for future work

Consensus regarding the utility of systems theory, and a focus on strengths and assets as well as supports and opportunities, is important for our future work in several ways. The strengths and assets give us a way to index and define success among young people. The supports and opportunities present a related way to describe positive conditions across developmental settings. System theory helps us realize the interconnections among these factors and implies the need to look to the configuration of the whole ecology.

This consensus has resulted from theory-driven, methodologically sophisticated work meant to understand the nature and trajectory of human development. Similarly, we have learned a lot from strong evaluation of the effects of intervention. Given the resources that public and private organizations spend on intervention meant to improve the well-being of young people, coupled with the countless “private” hours spent by adults and youth, it is discouraging that we know so little about how to create and sustain positive change at any scale.

This suggests the need for a body of work on a new set of questions that is just as strong as the best of our applied, developmen-

tal work on individual change. Because limits in human capital and financial resources demand priorities, we need to ask less about what young people need and focus much more on learning how to bring those conditions about.

In moving ahead, it may be useful to conceptualize the challenge as trying to enrich the supports and opportunities extant at some level in the lives of almost all youth. Because the literatures on intervention and change are so diverse and poorly connected, it would be useful to have syntheses of existing theory and empirical studies across fields; studies of the attempt to systematically intervene at one or more levels of the developmental system (individual, family, peers, organization, system, community); and work to theorize such intervention so that the literature feels less like individual evaluation and more like a coherent body of theory-testing, cumulative work.

Stating ten intervention strategies in this chapter is a start down this road, because the (tentative) claim is that these ten strategies are a step toward a taxonomy of interventions. But we now need to understand how the system linking intervention with support and opportunity operates with different people, places, and times. Particular studies are likely to focus on specific units of analysis (such as the individual, organization, or system), but the current developmental theory exemplified by this volume forces our attention on the relationships among them. Over time, such a research agenda has a chance to help us understand what it takes for all youth to experience the successful development enjoyed now by only some of them.

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