AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Brooke Dolenc Nott for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Development and Family Studies presented on December 11, 2013.

Title: "We Are Not All One Puzzle Piece": Youth Voice, Homelessness, and Positive Youth Development

Abstract approved:

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Positive youth development posits that all youth possess the capacity to change and grow as they interact with their contexts. That capacity is activated and nurtured by a beneficial ecological environment often unavailable for homeless youth. Only a limited number of studies focus on the positive development and strengths of homeless teens or what positive development means to youth in general. Theories and conceptualizations about adolescent development are most often constructed by adults without reflection from adolescents themselves. Therefore, using a youth-centered inductive approach, adolescents' opinions and views on positive youth development, well-being, strengths, and success were sought through ten focus groups with 18 homeless youth and 20 non-homeless (4-H) youth, ages 12 – 17. This dissertation is comprised of two manuscripts that use qualitative content analysis to report on the contrasting views of homeless and 4-H youth and youth's collective perspectives on the study topics as well as responses to a predominant model of positive youth development. Manuscript one addresses the discrepancies in youth's views and experiences by subgroup – homeless or 4-H. Analyses revealed youth's

different conceptualizations of their sense of self, personal strengths, happiness, family support, and risk avoidance. Homeless youth demonstrated deeper self-awareness in describing the strengths of their personal qualities, as opposed to 4-H youth, who cited their strengths in terms of activity related accomplishments. Findings also demonstrated homeless youth's adaptation to their lacking ecologies, such as non-supportive parents, as they sought out other health-promoting relationships in their place. Homeless youth also viewed risk avoidance as an aspect of doing well, unlike 4-H youth. Manuscript two highlights youth's collective perspectives of doing well. According to this analysis youth's views were focused on the future and reaching their goals, including enjoyable careers and educational achievements. The youth also valued social skills, especially humor and humility in relating to people, to be successful. Unexpectedly, youth held different interpretations of what is traditionally understood as character and how character is conceptualized by the positive youth development framework. The findings of the two studies, considered concurrently, augment recent understandings of positive youth development and youth well-being by including diverse adolescents' perspectives which may lead to more relevant programming for youth. By recognizing the unique perspectives of youth from divergent environments, programming, theory, and policy involving positive development and strengths-based approaches can more effectively represent the strengths and views of youth from diverse backgrounds.

"We Are Not All One Puzzle Piece":
Youth Voice, Homelessness, and Positive Youth Development

by
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CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

Dr. Samuel Vuchinich was involved in the design and editing of both manuscripts. Dr. Mary Arnold helped provide access to some of the sample participants. She and Dr. Kate MacTavish also provided editorial comments on the manuscripts.

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To my daughter, Mckenna…may your voice – as well as all young voices – always be heard.

"We Are Not All One Puzzle Piece":
Youth Voice, Homelessness, and Positive Youth Development

Introduction

An estimated 1.5 to 2 million youth experience homelessness in the United States

in a given year (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). Thus, between eight to

fifteen percent of American youth experience homelessness by the time they are 18 years

old (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). Homeless youth face a unique set of risks

associated with life on the streets including the threat of physical assault, sexual attack,

exposure to violence, hunger, and a lack of health care. These experiences on the street

are merely successors to the earlier childhood challenges of homeless youth, including

harsh parenting, family breakdown, and abuse (Mallet, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005; Bao,

Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2000). The difficult early home environments for the youth,

exacerbated by the stressors related to living without permanent residence and

supervision, often result in poor health outcomes, increased suicide, high rates of conduct

disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, psychotic symptoms, lack of

connection with society, and perpetual homelessness (Boesky, Toro, & Bukowski, 1997;

Kidd & Carroll, 2007; Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004). These youth experience hardship and

are often powerless throughout the micro to macro levels of the ecological model

(Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 2006; Haber & Toro, 2004; Kidd, 2006; Smollar, 1999).

These difficult histories and trajectories may seem inconsistent with key elements

of positive youth development and leave the homeless youth at a disadvantage. Some of

the underlying assumptions of positive youth development theory, however, can be

applied to homeless youth. Positive youth development draws understanding from both

dynamic systems and ecological theories (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006;

Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009; Lerner, et al., 2005). These theories assert that youth interact with multiple contexts on multiple levels bidirectionally and transactionally. Moreover, youth's behaviors proceed from such interactions (Youngblade & Theokas, 2006). Positive youth development stresses that all youth possess the capacity to change and grow as they interact with their contexts (Benson et al., 2006; Geldhof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2013; Lerner, 2009). This emphasis on plasticity means even youth in harsh environments, such as homeless teens, have room for healthy development. According to the ecological model, the settings, places, and people that impact youth are vital for activating and nurturing the innate capacity to develop basic physical, mental, and social faculties. However, for homeless youth the sources for activation and nurturing of human capacities are not always present. The ecological context for homeless youth is often problematic with stressed family relationships, financial difficulties, increased exposure to negative peer and adult influences, unstable living arrangements, and limited health care (Haber & Toro, 2004; Kidd & Carroll, 2007; Mallet et al., 2005). Little is known about how youth living in such circumstances develop positive traits. Only a few studies have considered how youth living in such circumstances display resiliency and strengths (Bender, Thomas, McManus, Lantry, & Finn, 2007; Cleverley & Kidd, 2011; Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas, & Yockey, 2001). This represents a gap in the application of youth development theory to high risk populations. Therefore, investigating youth from diverse contexts, including both homeless and resident, is necessary when considering the contextual factors important to positive youth development.

Furthermore, few studies have depicted the meaning positive development holds

for youth, in general, as well as its meaning for youth from disparate backgrounds (Vo & Park, 2009). Not all existing developmental models (e.g., positive youth development) are informed by diverse populations including homeless youth and may fail to capture the nuances and challenges of these populations. Exploring and examining youth's viewpoints, opinions, and feelings by allowing them to discuss what they consider as important, not only provides growing opportunities for youth, but is an effective strategy for improving interventions and programming on youth development (Ensign, 2004; Gambone & Connell, 2004; Pope, 2009; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). Therefore, the objectives of the study were threefold, 1) to compare and contrast experiences and views around positive development with youth from two different contexts, homeless and non-homeless, 2) to bring the collective voices and opinions of two youth populations on positive development and well-being to the front of an emerging framework, and 3) to compare and contrast youth's views with the most prominent positive youth development constructs. This resulted in two manuscripts that addressed the three objectives. The first paper focused on objective one by exploring the differences between homeless and non-homeless youth's views on positive development. The second paper addressed objectives two and three by presenting youth's views collectively on positive development and well-being and their views on the prominent positive youth development theory. The remainder of this introduction section will address the following topics: historical perspectives and connected theories, youth voice and agency, youth development by social position, homeless youth definitions and disparities, and the manuscript overviews.

Historical Perspective and Connected Theories

Various theories and research have postulated the importance of positive

development throughout history. Philosophers and theorists (Erikson, 1968; Hume, 1748/2006; Kant, 1797/1991; Kohlberg, 1984a; Rousseau, 1773/1921) have long acknowledged the importance of youth's and adults' positive regard toward others and self as key for the sustainability of self and communities (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). The determination to understand and promote prosocial behavior, strengths, and growth in youth, specifically, has become a recently recognized research priority in the adolescent development field (Benson, 1997; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Laursen, 2003; Lerner, 2007; Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Prior to this and pointing to teens' struggle to put forth such positive regard, adolescence was viewed primarily as a time of "storm and stress" as promoted by G. Stanley Hall (Hall, 1904; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Though some teens do experience tensions as they work out the significant biological and cognitive changes characteristic of the period, many youth pass through these developmental milestones smoothly.

Stage Theories. Specially related to teens, Erikson (1968) framed development for adolescents as negotiating and working through the appropriate developmental tasks and achieving mastery, identity, and intimacy which lead to self-fulfillment and civil commitment to society (Côté, 2009; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Throughout Erikson's stages of development youth come to realize their roles in relation to others. Erikson identified the importance of trust within relationships, a sense of mastery related to circumstantial demands, and a strong self-concept as adolescents navigate their way into adulthood and ultimately become generative adults (Erikson, 1968). Several of these elements are similar to ideas related to positive youth development today, specifically

competency, confidence, connection, and contribution (Lerner et al., 2005).

Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958) and Kohlberg (1984b) also acknowledged teens' cognitive ability for greater moral reasoning capabilities throughout the adolescent years that provides a pathway to social well-being (Eisenberg & Morris, 2004). Teens in early adolescence move from self-oriented thoughts to reflection on themselves in relation to others, meanwhile gaining stronger empathy skills. Morally, younger teens tend to be guided by external principles that provide gains only for themselves, while older adolescents and young adults tend to internalize moral values and are guided by mutual respect between self and others (Eisenberg & Morris, 2004). Prosocial behaviors also increase throughout adolescence as youth's attention to the needs of others shifts and they are provided with more social contexts to interact with people outside the family.

Positive Psychology. The broader theory of positive psychology has recently gained in scientific interest as well as assets- or strengths-based approaches to investigating people's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Laursen, 2003; Lopez & Gallagher, 2009). Researchers have been investigating some strengths and positive aspects of people's lives for decades. However, fully formed theories of positive psychology and sustained research on the theories have emerged only recently. Martin Seligman in the late 90's took efforts to unify psychological researchers who studied strengths and positive characteristics of individuals and urged for less focus on people's problems within psychology (Lopez & Gallagher, 2009; McCammon, 2012; Seligman & Csikzentiinhalyi, 2000). Asset- or strengths-based approaches also draw upon positive psychology as these perspectives emphasize well-being, quality of life, optimal growth, flourishing, positive functioning, and strength assessments (Keyes, 2009; Laursen, 2003;

Sheldon & King, 2001). Generally, ascribing this positive lens to development and psychology assumes "that human beings possess an inherent, constructive, developmental tendency toward growth and fulfillment" (Linley, Joseph, Maltby, Harrington, & Wood, 2009, pg. 43).

Contextualist Theories. In addition to the ontogenetic theories and positive psychology, contextualist theories such as the ecological model (Bronfennbrenner & Morris, 2006) and developmental systems theories (Benson, 1997; Brandtstädter, 2006; Lerner, 1998; Lerner et al., 2005) have given weight to the interrelated environments that can augment and promote the healthy development of youth. Resiliency researchers have often theorized about what in particular helps some youth succeed amidst adverse contexts and why other youth seem to flounder (Masten, 2009; Werner & Smith, 1992; Werner & Smith, 2001). Researchers now tend to focus on the bi-directional person-context processes that promote resilience for youth, even though resilience studies first looked for either aspects of individuals or aspects within their contexts exclusively that made them resilient (Richardson, 2002; Rutter, 2007; Theron & Malindi, 2010). Accordingly, capitalizing on both developmental systems and ecological theories, it has been suggested that the impacts of mutually beneficial exchanges (e.g., adaptive developmental regulations) between individual and contextual interactions propel youth's positive development and that youth's behavior patterns and psychological traits emerge from such interactions (Brandtstädter, 2006; Lerner, et al., 2005; Youngblade & Theokas, 2006).

Well-being. Likewise, well-being theorists have also tried to identify the essential elements that embody well-being for youth. In this pursuit well-being is

recognized as socially and contextually bound (Camfield, Streuli, & Woodhead, 2009; Manderson, 2005). Manderson (2005) asserts, "individual sense of wellbeing, therefore, is more than the subjective assessment of embodiment; rather, it is embedded in and derives from society itself, socially produced and sustained by social structures and systems" (p. 13). Well-being is a broad concept and its definition has been debated. Yet its social and contextual nature, agreed upon by researchers, lends itself to context specific studies and acknowledgement of research participants' views.

Youth's well-being, in particular, has been defined by Bradshaw, Hoelscher and Richardson (2007) as "the realization of children's rights and the fulfillment of the opportunity for every child to be all she or he can be [in the light of a child's abilities, potential, and skills]. The degree to which this is achieved can be measured in terms of positive child outcomes, whereas negative outcomes and deprivation point to the neglect of children's rights" (p. 135; brackets added by Camfield, et al., 2009). Camfield and colleagues (2009) and Fattore, Mason and Watson (2007) describe several approaches to studying youth's well-being including quality of life measures, domain specific measures, developmental health, comparing and contrasting 'state of the child' national and international indices, and the child-focused approach. In 2007, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti report card, which provides an overview of children's well-being internationally, reported on six domains crucial to youth's well-being, including health and safety, education, peer and family relationships, behavior and risks, and subjective well-being (Land, Lamb, & Mustillo, 2001; Land, Lamb, Meadows, & Taylor, 2007). Yet, some well-being researchers wonder if youth's views match these domains or if youth prioritize theses domains in a similar manner (Fattore et al., 2007).

Given all these approaches and possible domains, the field still lacks a common taxonomy of youth well-being (Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011).

Positive Youth Development. Stemming from these models on resiliency, well-being, contextual theories, and positive psychology researchers have put forth various frameworks to articulate what youth need and what interactions are especially important for positive development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), including the Search Institute's Developmental Assets (Benson, 1997) and the "Big Three" of Youth Development Programs – program goals, atmosphere, and activities (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Prior to 2003, King and colleagues (2005b) found that a nomological network of positive youth development concepts did not exist in the nine leading development related research journals. While practitioners were enthusiastically promoting positive youth development in programming, few research studies provided a consistent framework for the topic. King and colleagues (2005b) urged researchers, theorists, and practitioners to collaborate and provide theory and research that related to practice. Overall, these studies showed that positive youth development constructs were less than consistent and empirical evidence for these concepts and their functions was limited.

Through a series of collaborations with youth development specialists and drawing on several of the past aforementioned studies on youth, Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2000) suggested a common language for positive youth development. They recommended that five key elements were critical to healthy development in youth which in part were originally suggested by Little (1993) (Lerner et al., 2000; Lerner et al., 2003; Lerner et al., 2005). Subsequently, the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD) by Lerner and colleagues (2005) was initiated to allow for a systematic analysis of these

concepts within a deductive approach (Alberts et al., 2006; Bowers et al., 2010; Jelicic, Bobek, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2007; Lerner et al., 2005; Phelps et al., 2010; Zarrett et al., 2007). The Five Cs that Lerner and colleagues (2005) suggest are Competence, Confidence, Connections, Character, and Caring.

Competence is related to youth's social, cognitive, academic, and vocational knowledge and abilities. Confidence captures youth's global positive sense of self. Positive social Connections stress the importance of positive bonds with youth's families, peers, school, and community contexts. Character reflects a respect for social and cultural norms while possessing a sense of right and wrong morality. Caring represents youth's willingness to identify with others, exhibiting empathy and sympathy. In addition, when the Five Cs are promoted it is thought a Sixth C, youth as Contributing members of society, is likely to follow (Lerner et al., 2005). In accordance with developmental systems theories (Brandtstädter, 2006; Lerner, 1998; Lerner et al., 2005), the Five Cs are supposed to act as the products of mutually beneficial interactions between individuals and contexts. Contribution emerges and perpetuates further beneficial individual – contextual interactions. While the assumption that certain behaviors result from beneficial individual and contextual exchanges is in accordance with ecological and developmental systems theories, asserting that these six constructs are the quintessential products for every youth still needs further investigation (Alberts et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2005; Zarrett et al., 2007).

Researchers tried to validate the PYD constructs in the first stages of the PYD study by finding groups of previously used items and measures that could be organized in a structure consistent with the Five Cs. Yet, other studies have not been able to replicate

this measurement model (Jones, Dunn, Holt, Sullivan, & Bloom, 2011). Though useful, and easily understood by those who deliver youth programming, the validity of the Five C constructs can be called into question in part because there was no data collected on whether the Five Cs are consistent with the way adolescents conceptualize the nature of positive development. Moreover, according to Klatt and Enright (2009), "Positive Youth Development is not currently a unified theory of development, but rather an emerging framework of ideas scholars are beginning to put forward regarding the nature of development during childhood and adolescence" (p. 36). More work is needed to improve the basic conceptualization of positive development for adolescents and youth. The present study seeks such improvement by taking an inductive research approach and investigating how diverse populations of youth conceptualize positive development.

Youth Voice and Agency

A primary notion in the positive youth development field is to make the theory accessible and relevant to the youth programs it hopes to enhance (Benson, et al., 2006; Lerner, 2007). This and the importance of youth agency in recent research (Burrow, O'Dell & Hill, 2010; Larson, 2006; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005) leads directly to a need for an inductive and exploratory approach to positive youth development. Process studies that consult youth on what they consider to be positive development for themselves have been few (Alberts et al., 2006; King et al., 2005a; Mariano, Roeser, Greathouse, & Koshy, 2012). Yet, empowering and including youth in their own development is a primary assumption underlying the positive youth development ideology. Positive youth development asserts that all youth have the capacity to change and grow as they interact with their contexts. Theoretically, the ideas behind positive

youth development stress that youth are not only recipients of experiences, but they co-create their experiences. Youth exercise agency and their engagement with contexts leads to positive outcomes (Benson et al., 2006). If youth development theory holds that youth agency is important, then it is essential to determine how youth understand positive development and well-being and account for this within theory related research.

Only three studies to date have analyzed open-ended responses from youth about positive youth development. One study used the written narrative questions and answers within the PYD measure by Lerner and colleagues (2005) which asked youth and parents about the characteristics that help youth do well in life (Alberts et al. 2006). These questions also inquired about youth and parents' meanings of Contribution. These data were coded predominately with the Five Cs and Contribution in mind allowing little space for youth's own views to speak for themselves. Another study coded written narrative responses about the meaning of success and spirituality on a primarily religious sample of youth (Mariano et al., 2012). This study also drew upon existing positive youth development labeling and theory to create categories in their qualitative analysis.

King and colleagues (2005a) also conducted a qualitative study which elicited participants' responses on their own meanings of thriving and doing well for youth. These researchers asked a relatively homogenous group of 50 practitioners and 52 parents about what it means for youth to thrive and do well in life. Seventy-one youth who "manifested exemplary positive development" were also recruited to the study. The study found that there were no common characteristics of thriving mentioned among these participants. With no common characteristics of thriving found, the researchers then classified the characteristics by the predominant Five Cs framework.

The authors acknowledge that if there is no consensus among a relatively homogenous population, then consensus among even more diverse populations should also not be expected (King et al., 2005a). How will researchers understand the ways positive youth development might be expressed for youth in more diverse situations? Youth who need effective programming related to positive development most may not be getting it in a way that applies to their unique circumstances as these youth are often overlooked in research. Limiting positive youth development research to youth who already are strong in it only creates a greater social divide among youth, which later translates into more divergent social capital and resources as young people move into adulthood.

The theories surrounding positive youth development emphasize the importance of intentionality in promoting growth. Positive youth development does not always occur naturally and must be encouraged in youth (Benson et al., 2006). Teens should be inspired by adults and institutions to exercise their agency in positive ways. Watts and Flanagan (2007) consider the possibility that researchers have exerted a form of adultism by excluding youth in the research processes thus far. Youth are infrequently considered as experts on their own personal growth, priorities, or needs. Youth's opinions and experiences, especially from marginalized populations, should be taken seriously and considered in research pursuits (Camfield et al., 2009). This will hopefully broaden positive youth development in a way that features youth's voices and experiences.

Youth Development by Social Position

Research to date has not addressed how positive youth development might be different for minority populations of youth, including ethnic minorities, LGBTQ,

homeless, and immigrant youth (Vo & Park, 2009). One study on positive youth

development found that thriving or healthy development entailed the following attributes:

school success, leadership, valuing diversity, physical health, helping others, delay of

gratification, and overcoming adversity (Benson et al., 2006). The aforementioned labels

clearly exclude certain youth from developing positively, such as those with illness or

youth on the street who are not attending school. Understanding how the constructs of

PYD might be expressed differently between advantaged and disadvantaged youth is

important for effective interventions that are guided by the PYD constructs.

The current model of PYD and the Five Cs is not informed by youth from these

diverse backgrounds and fails to consider diverse youth's challenges. Formal institutions

and families socialize youth and shape youth's normative views (Watts & Flanagan,

2007). The language of PYD and the Five Cs is promoted in several of these institutions

and while this should occur, researchers and practitioners might also consider whether

these concepts apply to all youth, especially youth with excessive barriers. According to

Watts and Flanagan (2007), "an emphasis on societal replication also obscures the

differences in perspective that comes with social diversity: Are young members of

marginalized groups as likely as more socially integrated youth to replicate or buy into a

system where they feel excluded?" (p. 781). Homeless youth can be recognized for their

diverse needs and encouraged in their unique strengths that exist amid a multitude of

barriers (Anderson & Koblinsky, 1995; Kidd, 2006). These youth also likely need a

language for their unique strengths that may or may not differ from mainstream youth.

Defining Youth Homelessness

The term homeless youth is defined in various ways throughout the research on

teen homelessness (Ensign, 1998; Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004). Several studies define

homeless youth as anyone under the age of 18 who is homeless (Ensign, 1998; Whitbeck

& Hoyt, 1999); whereas other studies use the age range of 12 to 24 years of age (Ensign,

1998; Bender et al., 2007; Kidd, 2007).   Specific lengths of time without a home are

often included in what constitutes youth as homeless. This ranges from being without a

place to sleep or remaining on the streets for one night to lacking a permanent residence

for many consecutive days (Kidd & Carroll, 2007; Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004). Some

practitioners also classify youth who have no adult authority in a home setting or are

unaccompanied minors as being homeless (Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004; National Coalition

for the Homeless, 2009). According to the Stewart B. McKinney Act, a person is

considered homeless who:

> lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence; and... has a primary
> night time residency that is: (A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter
> designed to provide temporary living accommodations, (B) an institution that
> provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or
> (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular
> sleeping accommodation for human beings (National Coalition for the Homeless,
> 2009).

Homeless youth may be living in transitional housing, substandard housing,

campgrounds, or cars or staying with friends or another family. For the purposes of this

study homeless youth were defined as individuals under 18 years of age living in

transitional housing at a privately operated shelter.

Homeless Youth and Disparities

Homeless youth, in particular, are often viewed from a deficit perspective;

however, these youth can and want to take important actions over their lives. While

many studies and services focus on the victimization and helplessness of homeless youth,

the agency of these youth should not be overlooked (Hyde, 2005; Bender et al., 2007).

Past studies on homeless youth suggest that successful interventions emphasize less of a

paternalistic perspective and more of an advocacy perspective when assisting homeless

youth (Kidd, 2003; Osborne, 2002; Pope, 2011; Thompson, McManus, Lantry, Windsor,

& Flynn, 2006). Many youth likely want to protect themselves from future pain and

should be empowered with the emotional and relational tools to do this (Hyde, 2005).

While this study focused on the strengths of homeless youth, the intent was not too

overlook their barriers but to understand their perspectives amidst these risks.

Homeless youth are often faced with hardships throughout the levels of the

ecological model which leads to the aforementioned emotional and relational pain (Haber

& Toro, 2004). These experiences plus life on the street are associated with homeless

youth being described as a group in the "borderlands" of mainstream culture (Muggleton,

2000; Rosaldo, 1989). Kidd (2006) emphasizes that "among such groups, there is a need

for exploratory work to inform hypothesis development and for a critical perspective

when applying theory, questions, and methods derived from non-homeless youth" (p.

396). A myriad of experiences within the family, social institutions, and broader culture

set apart the lives of homeless youth compared to mainstream youth that may or may not

motivate different conceptualizations of positive youth development for homeless teens.

Within the family microsystem, studies report homeless youth experience more

parental neglect, family conflict, and abuse compared to resident youth (Bao et al., 2000;

Smollar, 1999). Family issues, including dysfunction, punitive parenting, parent divorce

and/or separation, and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse within the home incite youth

to leave or be kicked out of their houses (Mallet et al., 2005; Bao et al., 2000; Smollar,

1999; Kidd, 2006). Parents of homeless youth score lower on measures of parental

monitoring, nurturance, and supportiveness and higher on rejection (Bao et al., 2000).

Studies report that 40% of homeless youth feel neglected by a parent (Slesnick, 2004).

Homeless youth may also experience more challenges than resources within the

institutions that interact in the exosystem of the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, &

Morris, 2006; Haber & Toro, 2004). Homeless youth experience a multitude of health

problems and lack access to health care. Teens are often an overlooked population

regarding health care as they are generally perceived as a healthy population; homeless

youth are an especially marginalized subpopulation of teens. Mortality rates in homeless

youth are 12-40 times higher than the rest of the population (Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004).

Homeless youth lack shelter and food; in an effort to survive they panhandle, trade sex

for money or food, and deal drugs elevating several health risks (Ensign, 1998; Tarasuk,

Dachner, Poland, & Gaetz, 2009). Health related problems such as injuries, malnutrition,

scabies, and lice are also known as common among homeless teens. Homeless youth

have higher rates of suicide, depression, conduct disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder,

psychotic symptoms, and unhealthy addictions (Boesky et al., 1997; Kidd, 2004). Many

street kids are denied access to health care when they cannot provide a home address

(Ensign, 1998). The very institutions meant to protect youth often deny these teens,

limiting the ways the youth can reach their full potential as healthy beings.

Not only do some institutions represent problems in the exosystem for homeless

youth, but on a broader macrosystem level homeless teens experience stigma and

negative stereotypes embedded in cultural mentalities. The symbolism associated with

having a permanent residence underpins the meaning of citizenship in America (Arnold,

2004). Thus, not having a home has several social implications for the homeless.

Homeless youth are often viewed as adventure seekers, druggies, and/or directionless

youth.   Homeless youth are often harassed by police and experience victimization from

adults (Kidd, 2004).   Street kids view themselves as excluded from society which clearly

has negative outcomes on developmental processes that require positive connections and

associations. This lack of connection with society has significant implications for what

positive youth development might mean for them.

　　　　Homeless youth are affected by a layering of constraints or cumulative

disadvantage (Dannefer, 2003) related to opportunities and characteristics, including

personal, familial, and social structural characteristics throughout their childhood and

leading up to their adult years. Given homeless youth's disadvantages, life obstacles, and

social stigma compared to non-homeless youth, understanding how positive youth

development might express itself differently in this population is warranted.

Youth Voice in Positive Development Study

　　　　 The constructs of the Five Cs of PYD have been primarily applied to mainstream

youth and were constructed according to adult frameworks with a deductive conceptual

approach. This is in contrast to an underlying assumption related to the theory of positive

youth development, a desire to empower *all* youth (Benson et al., 2006). Given the

barriers of being a homeless teen and the possibility that positive development occurs

differently for homeless youth and youth who are not homeless, this project sought a

better understanding of positive development, strengths, and well-being in the under-

studied population of homeless youth. At the same time, the project sought articulations

of positive youth development from youth who have access to resources not available to

homeless youth, 4-H specifically, not only to bring forth more youth voices but also to provide a comparison to the homeless youth. Analyzing different groups of youth from contrasting contexts allows a space for the potential overt and covert differences between groups to emerge (Charmaz, 2003). Qualitative work in particular is sensitive to context specific processes in which different configurations of phenomena influence varying outcomes across contexts. Thus, focus groups of homeless youth and 4-H youth were chosen as the method to investigate positive development concepts collectively and across both groups (Goodwin & Hoorwitz, 2002). Interviewing youth in contrasting contexts is necessary to extrapolate underlying configurations of concepts related to positive development across diverse populations of youth.

Context of the Study

The study took place in a mid-sized university town with a population between 50,000 – 60,000 people. The median income for families in 2010 was $72,000 and 54% of individuals 25 years and older held a bachelor's degree or higher, well-above the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The local youth homeless shelter serves two primary counties, providing 12 beds to youth, but there are also several surrounding counties without a youth shelter. Therefore, they also accept youth from other counties if they have space. The shelter provides overnight services for youth ages 10-17 and also offers a transitional living program for youth 18 and older. Youth come to the shelter through a variety of paths, including referrals from other social service agencies, juvenile and mental health departments, schools, self-referrals, and parent-referrals. The shelter tries to help youth develop a path out of homelessness while emphasizing life skills, positive relationships, and mentoring. The shelter is funded by local government and

private donors and foundations.

The 4-H program is a national youth development program – the largest out-of-school youth program in the U.S. – administered by local Land Grant Universities. 4-H emphasizes programs in science, healthy living, and food security that empower youth. 4-H is funded at the national level by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and through state and local funding sources (Rennekamp & Lesmeister, 2011). Studies have shown that youth involved in 4-H programs fair better on several positive outcomes, such as healthier habits, stronger academic competence, and more civic engagement compared to other youth (Lerner & Lerner, 2013).

Based on the aforementioned research and suppositions, the Youth Voice in Positive Development (YVPD) study is described in two manuscripts that address the primary study aims: 1) to compare and contrast experiences and views around positive development with youth from two different contexts, homeless and non-homeless, 2) to bring the collective voices and opinions of two youth populations on positive development and well-being to the front of an emerging framework, and 3) to compare and contrast youth's views with the most prominent positive youth development constructs.

Overview of Manuscript I

While some recent research has addressed homeless youth from a strengths approach (Bender et al., 2007), comparative studies of homeless and non-homeless youth from a strengths perspective are few; research that includes youth's views on positive youth development are also limited. With the intent to address these gaps, the first paper concentrates on the differing views and experiences of homeless and non-homeless (4-H)

youth on doing well, strengths, and positive development. Qualitative analysis of the focus group transcripts for paper one highlighted youth's differing views by using a matrix of analyzed themes on one axis and focus group categories – 4-H or homeless – on the opposing axis. Themes that occurred for only one youth population were noted and grouped by overarching topics. These differing themes and the discrepancies within them by population of youth – 4-H or homeless – are highlighted and discussed.

Overview of Manuscript II

The second paper examines the overall portrayal of youth's views related to doing well and compares their views to aspects of the Five Cs of PYD model. Based on qualitative analysis of youth's interviews, this paper represents both samples' opinions and experiences and discusses the prominent themes described by both groups of youth. Youth's direct opinions of the Five Cs were examined as well as how their free-flowing views of doing well corresponded to the Five C constructs. This allowed for a comparison of a prominent model of positive youth development and the youth's opinions. Applications of youth's views to programming are also described.

Considering the manuscripts concurrently provides evidence of both differing as well as comparative perspectives of doing well, strengths, and positive development between populations of youth and prominent theories related to these topics. Understanding youth's views that have normative and non-normative experiences (i.e., non-homeless and homeless) helps further expand the boundaries of developmental models. As these theories emphasize individual agency, more research that includes youth perspectives is needed to more adequately address how to promote thriving in youth from various backgrounds.

Homeless and 4-H Youth Perceptions of Strengths and Positive Development

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Abstract

Homeless youth face a unique set of risks compared to non-homeless youth related to their backgrounds and life on the streets. The distinctive circumstances of homeless youth potentially represent a contrast to key principles in the field of positive youth development as well as strengths-based approaches. Positive youth development posits that all youth possess the capacity to change and grow as they interact with their contexts. That capacity is activated and nurtured by a beneficial ecological environment often unavailable for homeless youth. Only a limited number of studies focus on the positive development and strengths of homeless youth or what positive development means to youth from diverse contexts. Using an inductive qualitative approach, this study investigated differences in views on success in life and personal strengths from two youth samples: homeless and 4-H. Findings from focus groups with 18 homeless and 20 4-H youth featured discrepancies between youth's opinions and experiences by subgroup – 4-H or homeless. Analyses revealed youth's different conceptualizations of their sense of self, personal strengths, happiness, family support, and risk avoidance. Homeless youth demonstrated deeper self-awareness, as opposed to 4-H youth, in describing the strengths of their personal qualities. Findings also demonstrated homeless youth's adaptation to their lacking ecologies, such as non-supportive parents, as they sought out other health-promoting relationships in their place. By recognizing the unique perspectives of youth from divergent environments, programs and theory involving positive development and strengths-based approaches can more effectively represent youth from diverse backgrounds.

Keywords: homeless youth, positive youth development, strengths-based

Homeless and 4-H Youth Perceptions of Strengths and Positive Development

An estimated 1.5 to 2 million youth experience homelessness in the United States in a given year (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). When comparing homeless and non-homeless youth, the homeless face a unique set of risks related to their backgrounds and life on the streets. Without supervision and protection, these youth face threats of physical and sexual attacks, mental health issues, and food insecurities (Dorsen, 2010; Kidd, 2004; Tarasuk, Dachner, Poland, & Gaetz, 2009; Tyler & Johnson, 2006). These experiences on the street are often successors to the earlier childhood challenges of homeless youth, including neglectful parenting, family disruption, and abuse (Bao, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2000; Mallet, Rosenthal & Keys, 2005).

Living without permanent residence and supervision is linked to adversity in several levels of the ecological context. The bioecological model holds that the settings, places, and people that impact youth are vital for activating and nurturing the innate capacity to develop basic physical, psychological, moral, and social faculties (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The ecological sources for promoting human capacities, such as basic resources and supportive families and social institutions, however, are not often present for homeless youth in ways that they are for non-homeless youth. Research on human development in homeless youth populations is limited and has tended to focus on developmental deficits (Bao et al., 2000; Mallet et al., 2005; Slesnick, 2004). Recently however, a few studies have considered how youth living in such circumstances develop positive traits (Bender, Thomas, McManus, Lantry, & Finn, 2007; Cleverley & Kidd, 2011; Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas, & Yockey, 2001).

The aforementioned studies are especially important because of emergent

research on the significance of the development of positive characteristics (e.g., empathy, confidence, and self-regulation) for well-being into adulthood (Burt & Paysnick, 2012; Lerner et al., 2005). Such emphasis is seen in work on positive psychology (Keyes, 2009), positive youth development (Lerner, 2009) and strength-based approaches to interventions (Richardson, 2002). Positive characteristics can provide a buffer against risk and the typical challenges of young adulthood. However, some of this research assumes that the nature of positive development is the same for all youth, regardless of developmental challenges experienced. A primary aim of this study is to examine the assertion that positive development is uniform for various groups of youth. Furthermore, while much research and many services focus on the helplessness of homeless youth, this study examines how homeless youth view their own positive development in a way that sheds light on their agency and resiliency (Hyde, 2005; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012; Rew et al., 2001). For the purposes of this study homeless teens were defined as individuals 12 to 18 years of age who do not have a permanent home and/or are living in transitional housing at a shelter.

Very little research exists on what positive development *means* to youth from diverse contexts – such as homeless youth (Vo & Park, 2009). A myriad of experiences within family, social institutions, and the broader culture set apart the lives of homeless youth compared to resident youth; this may lead to different conceptualizations of strengths and optimal development for homeless teens. Kidd (2006) emphasizes that "among such groups, there is a need for exploratory work to inform hypothesis development and for a critical perspective when applying theory, questions, and methods derived from non-homeless youth" (p. 396). Without the youth's perspective, models of

positive youth development may not accurately represent the nature of positive development and the challenges experienced by these populations. Thus, this study used an inductive qualitative approach to capture youth perspectives and compare voices of homeless and non-homeless youth. The results are interpreted in light of positive psychology, resiliency, strengths perspectives, and positive youth development. The juxtaposition of two samples allowed for the investigation of similarities and differences between them.

Youth Development through a Positive Lens

Various theories and research from ontogenetic and contextualist perspectives have postulated the importance of positive development. More recently the full scale idea of positive psychology has become influential as well as assets- or strengths-based approaches to investigating people's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Keyes, 2009; Laursen, 2003; Sheldon & King, 2001). The determination to understand and promote prosocial behavior, strengths, and growth in youth, in particular, has become an important research priority. This signals a critical departure from the longstanding teenage "storm and stress" view held in the adolescent development field (Benson, 1997; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Contextualist theories such as the ecological model (Bronfennbrenner & Morris, 2006) and developmental systems theories (Benson, 1997; Brandtstädter, 2006; Lerner, 1998; Lerner et al., 2005) have given weight to the interrelated environments that can promote the healthy development of youth. Moreover, resiliency researchers have theorized about what in particular helps some youth succeed amidst adverse contexts and why other youth seem to flounder (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed 2009; Werner &

Smith, 2001). Researchers now tend to focus on the bi-directional person-context

processes that ignite resilience in youth (Richardson, 2002; Theron & Malindi, 2010).

Stemming from these models on resiliency, contextual theories, and positive

psychology researchers have presented various frameworks to articulate what youth need

and what interactions are especially important for positive development (Eccles &

Gootman, 2002), including the Search Institute's Developmental Assets (Benson, 1997)

and the "Big Three" of Youth Development Programs – program goals, atmosphere, and

activities (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). More recently, the 4-H Study of Positive Youth

Development (PYD) by Lerner and colleagues (2005) provided a systematic analysis of

proposed positive development concepts using latent factor modeling methods (Alberts et

al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2005). Lerner and colleagues (2005) advocate that Five Cs are

essential to youth's positive development including Competence, Character, Confidence,

social Connections, and Compassion. In accordance with developmental systems

theories (Brandtstädter, 2006; Lerner, 1998; Lerner et al., 2005), the Five Cs are

hypothesized to act as the products of mutually beneficial interactions between

individuals and contexts.

However, there have been some limitations to the Five Cs research including a

lack of youth's own voices and how youth's perspectives vary by diverse subsections of

the youth population (Vo & Park, 2009). These studies have been primarily deductive

and based on numerous previously developed questionnaires that did not consider how

adolescents themselves viewed their positive development. This is important because of

the emergent prominence of youth agency in recent theories. Many of the youth in the

samples were involved in 4-H, respected as a high quality youth program, and have

middle class backgrounds without the challenges experienced by homeless youth. This leaves open the question of whether the Five C paradigm applies to youth with cumulative challenges such as homeless youth. The present study addresses both of these limitations by using inductive qualitative methods to compare homeless youth to resident 4-H youth.

Youth Voice and Agency

Current research and theory on positive youth development have emerged primarily from quantitative analysis and researchers' views of developmental theories. Studies that consult youth on what they consider to be optimal development for themselves have been few (Alberts et al., 2006; King et al., 2005; Mariano, Roeser, Greathouse, & Koshy, 2012). Yet, empowering and including youth in their own development is a primary assumption underlying the positive youth development ideology – asserting that youth are not only recipients of experiences but they co-create their experiences (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). Positive youth development posits that youth exercise agency and their engagement with contexts leads to positive outcomes and implies that all individuals have the capacity to change and grow as they interact with their contexts (Lerner, 2009).

Only three studies to date have analyzed open-ended responses from youth about positive youth development. These studies found little consensus among youth, parents, and practitioners on what it means for youth to thrive without imposing theoretical constructs such as the Five Cs on the data collection process (Alberts et al., 2006; King et al., 2005; Mariano et al., 2012). The different perceptions of thriving across parents and youth highlight the importance of examining views on positive development within these

groups. Moreover, some of the studies have intentionally excluded findings from youth who did not possess what was described as "exemplary positive development" (King et al., 2005). Since little is known about the youth perspective on positive development in marginalized populations, the current study explores youth's personal views and seeks to provide new information on youth voice to the positive development field.

Given homeless youth's disadvantages, an examination of how their perceptions of positive development and strengths might differ from resident youth is warranted. Analyzing different groups of youth from contrasting contexts allows a space for the potential overt and covert differences between groups to emerge (Charmaz, 2003). This study used an inductive qualitative approach to first, separately analyze perspectives of homeless youth and non-homeless youth, and second to compare the qualitative results between the two groups.

Method

Qualitative work can be used for refining theory and examining its variability in different populations. This study used focus groups with qualitative analysis to elucidate the meaning of positive development within diverse groups of teens and was the favored methodology because focus groups allow youth participants to express and discuss their opinions, emotions, and experiences with one another. Through discussion, youth are able elaborate on others' views and agree or disagree with one another indicating whether a viewpoint is widely shared (Barbour, 2007); this provides a large amount of data in the youth's own words with minimal involvement from the interviewer (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Focus groups were also used to promote the empowering aspect of positive youth

development, reducing the power inequities between researchers and youth by treating youth as the experts (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). This power differential is especially important when considering underrepresented populations, such as homeless teens. Creating an open and peer-based environment is less threatening than one-on-one settings and is important for homeless youth who may lack trust of adults and service workers (Theron & Malindi, 2010). Focus groups have also been an effective method of gathering homeless youth's opinions and gaining insights on youth's attitudes, especially in the health-related and nursing literature (Christiani, Hudson, Nyamathi, Mutere, & Sweat, 2008; Cormack, 2009; Ensign, 2004). Allowing youth to co-create meaning through focus groups, we sought to juxtapose two samples of youth representing different contexts to understand positive development and strengths for these youth.

Participants

Recruitment. Youth were recruited for focus groups from two primary sources – the local county's 4-H program and a local homeless shelter – using purposive sampling. After IRB approval for all procedures, homeless shelter youth were recruited through their residence at a local shelter. The shelter provides overnight shelter services focusing on paths out of homelessness and life skills for up to 12 youth at a time, ages 10-17. These youth come to the shelter through a variety of paths, including referrals from other social service agencies, juvenile and mental health departments, schools, self-referrals, and parent-referrals. The shelter staff agreed to include the focus groups as part of youth's optional activities that take place after school on the weekdays and weekends. During the scheduled activity time, the researcher visited the shelter and asked youth if they would like to participate in the focus groups. 4-H youth were recruited at a large 4-

H event where the youth were informed about the study. The local 4-H agent also forwarded an email from the researcher to all parents of the county's 4-H youth about the study and interested families contacted the researcher directly. The 4-H program is a national youth development program – the largest out-of-school youth program in the U.S – administered by local Land Grant Universities. 4-H emphasizes programs in science, healthy living, and food security that empower youth. Studies have shown that youth involved in 4-H programs fair better on several positive outcomes, such as healthier habits, stronger academic competence, and more civic engagement compared to other youth (Lerner & Lerner, 2013).

Thirty-eight youth participated in the focus groups, including five groups from the shelter and five groups from the 4-H program. Previous research on focus groups indicates that three to five groups are adequate for saturation, however, when considering differences by social position, supplementary groups were added for adequate saturation (Morgan, 1997). Groups ranged from three to six youth and included both male and female participants.

Homeless and 4-H Youth Demographics. The study included 18 youth from the homeless shelter and 20 youth from the 4-H program. There were six males, ten females, and two participants identified themselves as other in terms of gender in the shelter groups. There were seven males and thirteen females in the 4-H focus groups. Homeless shelter participants' ages ranged from 13 to 17 years and 4-H participants' ages ranged from 12 to 17 years. Youth were asked to describe their perceived family's socioeconomic status in their community on a scale of 1 through 10 (1 = lowest in terms of housing, money, and jobs; 10 = highest in terms of housing, money and jobs).

Twenty-five percent of homeless shelter youth reported their family being a 4 or below

whereas none of the 4-H youth reported being a 4 or below (see Table 1). Fifty-percent

of homeless shelter youth reported they did have a place they considered their home; 44%

indicated they had no place to live; one youth did not answer. These youth reported

being homeless for various lengths of time ranging from 1 week to 6 months. All 4-H

youth indicated they lived in a home. Youth's ages, grades, race/ethnicity, family

structure, and involvement in extracurricular activities are also reported in Table 1.

Procedure

Homeless youth focus groups took place in the dining room of the homeless

shelter where youth were residing. The 4-H focus groups took place at the local 4-H

Extension site meeting room. Each youth filled out a short background questionnaire

before the discussion began and a $15 gift card for attending. Focus groups lasted

between 45 to 90 minutes. The focus groups were recorded using a digital voice recorder.

The discussions were in a semi-structured interview format with a general outline

of questions and probes asked by the researcher. As in one-on-one interviews, the semi-

structured format allows interviewees more freedom in what they disclose and the

researcher can highlight certain themes from the free speech of the participants (Corbin &

Morse, 2003). Interview questions focused on the following main topics: examples of

people who do well in life; definitions of a good life; aspects of life that make it hard to

do well; and internal and external strengths of the youth (see Table 2 for interview

questions). The same questions were asked of both homeless and 4-H groups. Notes on

body language, interaction, and social cues were also taken for post hoc evaluation of

transcripts, notes, and recordings (Morgan, 1997). The researcher had vast experience

working with teens in after-school programs and with homeless youth, in particular.

Data Analysis

The digital recordings of the focus groups were transcribed into text and a content analysis of the narrative responses was conducted. The majority of transcripts were transcribed by the researcher except for three that were professionally transcribed. More formal analyses occurred after reading through the transcripts and listening to the recordings several times. The transcriptions were then imported into and analyzed in MaxQDA[10], a software package designed for the use of text-based qualitative data analysis.

Guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2003), the researcher identified indigenous categories (in vivo coding; Corbin & Strauss, 2007) as initial themes. Primary importance was given to the youth's use of language and ideas throughout the analysis; as such, several of the codes were labeled with words used by the youth. Emerging themes were documented and sub-grouped under headings but with the aim to remain open and flexible to various categories throughout the analysis. Codes were developed based on themes that were mentioned with frequency or appeared particularly salient through the use of strong language, emotion, and interaction among the youth (Barbour, 2007). In further analysis, the author coded with a more focused review on the previous developed categories – looking for confirmation, discrepancies, and divergent categories (Patton, 2002). Codes were originally developed without any designations of which transcripts were from 4-H or shelter groups in an attempt to make the research semi-blind to the subgroup distinction, aside from the researcher's memory of the discussions. Later, differences between the two samples of youth were found using

a matrix with themes on one axis and focus group categories – 4-H or homeless – on the opposing axis. Themes that occurred for only or primarily one youth population were flagged and then grouped by overarching topics and themes. The findings below represent the topics with the most variation between the two samples of youth.

Findings

This paper examines the differences in responses between youth living in a homeless shelter and youth in a 4-H program. The categories/themes below represent the most salient and prominent differences between 4-H and shelter youth within the data, including personal strengths, identity, risk avoidance, family, and happiness.

I Am What I Do vs. I Am Who I Am

4-H youth: "*I think I am good at…*" Variation was apparent in the way youth spoke about their personal strengths and characteristics. Overwhelmingly when the 4-H youth discussed the strengths inside themselves they referred to the assorted activities in which they were successful. Many of the 4-H youth described being good at skills in their care for and showmanship of animals, common activities for youth involved in 4-H. Success with various activities, including sports, music, school subjects, and hobbies – ranging from martial arts to ceramics - were highlighted by the youth. 4-H youth often told stories of their accomplishments with descriptions of winning awards and defeating other youth or siblings in activity-related competitions. One 4-H youth spoke of her ambition to be first chair in flute:

> *There is a new competitive edge that I like in some ways and in some ways I don't, because there is this one kid in my class, and he plays 15 different instruments, I am not even exaggerating! He also plays flute. His tone is terrible, but his theory is amazing! But my tone is a lot better and I have beaten him in several places but he is still a chair above me [looks down and disappointed].*

Another youth commented on his achievements related to his hobby, *"I'm pretty good at archery…I've gotten like the state champion for my grade for four years."*

Shelter youth: "*My biggest strength is I am…*" In contrast, the homeless youth spoke much less about activities as a component of their personal strengths. They reported on personal qualities instead, such as being *"honest," "a leader," "very articulate," "creative," "accepting,"* having *"compassion for others,"* and putting their *"mind to something, and getting it done regardless."* The homeless shelter youth exhibited more self-reflection as they described personal transformations, narrating how they were working to fix problems or handle situations differently. One youth stated, *"That's how I used to be [shy] but then I just decided to jump in to the situation. I just decided to be in the situation, life is more exciting that way."* Another youth reflected on the meaning of a successful life and how his life does not match up to his ideal:

> *You know I figure if you are physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy you are doing pretty well. I mean you are doing better than me sometimes…[It is] someone that is able to make better life choices…Choices that are good now, but yet also life choices that may lead them on a road that makes them more successful than another and being able to choose which one that road is and how it will affect you ten years down the line.*

Several shelter youth saw stubbornness as an asset, including the ability to say no to peers: *"I have a strength, I could say no."* The following exchange also demonstrated the importance of stubbornness:

> Youth 1: *I'm really stubborn.*
> Interviewer: *Yeah? How do you see that as a good thing for you?*
> Youth 1: *Cause like I don't know. All my friends are really pushy, and so I usually stand my ground and don't let them …*
> Youth 2: *Peer pressure?*
> Youth 1: *Yeah, that's the word*

Pleasing Others vs. Not Caring What Other's Think

4-H youth: *"I wish we didn't have to be this well-rounded person."* 4-H youth also focused on being well-rounded in conjunction with their reports of accomplishments in activities. One focus group in particular participated in a diatribe about the importance and pressure to be well-rounded for college applications and future jobs. These youth highlighted the need to be involved in multiple activities including sports, advanced placement classes, music, and community service. Several of the youth mentioned disliking several of their activities, but participated in them nonetheless. One 4-H youth declared:

> *I am so busy with a bunch of stuff and take on so many things this year and I want to drop some of them. But, at the same time, I have already committed to them and I guess I wish we didn't have to be this well rounded person cause I really like to excel in just a couple of areas.*

Some youth expressed feeling pressure from other peers to be good at everything and others reported pressure from parents or school personnel that were pushing students toward college. One youth described her struggle with advanced placement classes:

> *There are social pressures to do really well too, cause I don't necessarily want to be taking AP classes, but…as soon as I drop into those lower classes. One, I am not going to be challenged and two, I feel kind of bad about myself too and yeah, and I feel like people will judge me differently.*

Another youth communicated her ambivalence about AP classes:

> *I wouldn't be in the honors AP Lit and studies if it weren't for my parents and family and my friends, because you feel really pressured to do it…But I don't necessarily enjoy it…But, it just seems like if you can get an A, you should push yourself to do it, even if it is not like fun.*

4-H females in particular did not feel "good enough," and spoke of comparing themselves to others and the burden of being involved in multiple activities. As one 4-H female exclaimed, *"I feel like I have to be good at everything because again, college! You know, applications and getting ready, I have to, like I can't have gaps, everything*

has to have something that I excel in." One 4-H youth said, *"I get mad when I can't do something. I can't live without being successful."* The 4-H youth also remarked about the difficulties balancing and prioritizing their activities. These issues were never talked about in the homeless shelter discussions. While 4-H youth often mentioned pressure to do well, shelter youth never spoke of a pressure or expectations to excel.

Shelter youth: *"I don't really care what other people think about me."* Not only did homeless shelter youth not mention pressure to succeed, they spoke specifically about disregarding what others thought of them. One homeless shelter youth provided this description, "*I don't really care what other people think. I'm like that's your problem. Like does it matter? No. It matters what I think about myself."* Another homeless shelter youth stated, "*One of my strengths is when if someone doesn't like me, who cares, that is their opinion. You know then I just find some new friends."* Shelter youth viewed this attitude as a positive aspect of themselves. Another respondent acknowledged how trying to please others can be tiring:

> *If you live a life that you are proud of, I think that should be all that matters. I think you should be proud of your life, not everybody else. Cause if you live your life trying to please everyone else, you are just going to wear yourself out.*

Family Support vs. Ability to Do Well Without a Supportive Family

Youth also described the support they received externally from others or institutions in relation to helping them do well in life. Given the social structural difference between the youth in either being homeless or not, they subsequently answered the question about external support in vividly different ways.

4-H youth: *"My mom and my dad, biggest supporters in the world."* In discussions about support, the majority of youth who described their parents as

supportive were 4-H youth. They acknowledged how much support they received from family and parents in terms of parents *"making a sacrifice," "driving them around everywhere," "offering encouragement," "putting roofs over their heads,"* and *"helping prioritize life for them."* Other youth attributed their ambition to caring parents such as, *"because I know a lot of people who aren't driven at all, but that's because they have parents who just don't care."* Another 4-H youth acknowledged:

> *My parents, definitely, always supportive of me. They're always there for you. They let you try something new and they'll back you up for it and even if you don't like it, they'll be like, "Okay, it's fine."… They always like help you out.*

Shelter youth: *"[They] don't have a supportive family…but they've made it. They've made it really well and they're happy."* In contrast, as the topic of families and parents was discussed, homeless shelter youth frequently revealed feeling unsupported or inconsistently supported by their parents. Homeless youth's parents were a commonly stated reason for the youth not succeeding. Several youth also stopped talking when the topic of family was raised. One youth declared, *"Let's see, yeah my family sucked, so I have nothing to say."*

Ambivalence. Furthermore, homeless youth displayed ambivalence as they spoke of family, generally and personally; they simultaneously valued family and de-valued their need of support from them. Only shelter youth, not 4-H youth, mentioned family as an aspect of having a good life in general. Youth from the homeless shelter specifically mentioned others who were able to take care of their kids as examples of successful people. One homeless youth narrated the following about the importance of good parenting in her role model:

> *She's doing good in life. She's keeping on track in life and makes sure her kids have what they need and things. I don't know, that's important for me to make*

sure your kids have everything they need or helping someone else's other kids out.

Homeless shelter youth and 4-H youth also reported that family was one of the most important aspects of their life and a longing for family support. One youth stated, "*there's always those kids getting in their mom's cars and you know they go home and she bakes them cookies for after school snack and just like that kind of life where everything is like shiny and perfect.*" However, when asked to respond to the idea of connection with family, friends, and social institutions as being a component to doing well, several shelter youth mentioned that family is not required to do well, such as:

> *If my parents had been supportive it would boost my confidence, I would feel like I was supported and loved and accepted and it would make my life a lot better. So like in a sense that is great, but it is not essential. I know a lot of people they have a rough family but they've made it.*

Another youth acknowledged how parental support would have been helpful, but qualifies this by saying it is not absolutely necessary to have such support:

> *If it was not for my parents I probably would not have had so many problems growing up and yeah, maybe I would not have stolen so much. So, I don't think a family connection is so much. You can make your own family, you build your own family… but I definitely believe having connections is important but family connections is not the most important.*

Analysis demonstrated shelter youth's ambivalence toward family and, especially, parents. Family was important and related to doing well for homeless youth, but reports of non-supportive or inconsistently supportive parents were frequent. Family and parents were barriers to doing well for shelter youth and cited as not *necessarily* needed for individuals to succeed.

Siblings, mentors, and pets. Although negativity often surrounded the discussions about parents for shelter youth, they frequently affirmed siblings, other adults, and pets as supportive. Sibling relationships were noted as an important aspect of

the homeless youth's lives and were viewed as role models of success – strongly valued

for their support and help. One youth described the support from his brother this way:

> *That's the only one [brother] I love in my family because my mom she broke her*
> *promise and did drugs and is going to jail and so she is not in my life anymore. So*
> *the only family I trust is my brother because they are actually nice to me and they*
> *do stuff for me.*

Another participant stated, *"My sister, she has been there through everything that*

has happened between me and my mom. So, she is there just telling me everything will be

okay. You know, we'll get through this." Other shelter youth described how their siblings

understood them more than anyone else.

Homeless shelter youth also told stories of other adults besides their parents as

supporting them, whereas 4-H youth rarely mentioned non-familial adults in their lives.

Shelter youth spoke specifically of parole officers, counselors, family friends, shelter

staff, and a school liaison for homeless youth. One homeless shelter youth described the

help of another adult in the following way: *"Well, last year when I was in a whole bunch*

of trouble and stuff my family friend would like always go to court with me and he would

like just come and talk to me at my house like just randomly." Another shelter youth

described the help of an older mentor:

> *She's 19-20-ish, so she's like closer to my age, and she's gone through exactly the*
> *same stuff as me. We were talking and she was like, "Oh, yeah, I did the same*
> *thing at that age, so you should try to like fix this." She understands exactly what*
> *I'm going through.*

The staff at the homeless shelter were frequently cited as a strong support system

by the homeless youth. One youth described the help the shelter staff by saying:

> *I could go to any of them [staff]. I mean they just make you feel really*
> *welcome...they are there to help you and if you ask them for their help, they will*
> *help you. They've helped me out a lot, they've helped me change a lot.*

Pets were also acknowledged as a support for youth at the shelter, but not a single time for 4-H youth, even though many 4-H youth frequently work with animals. One shelter youth remarked that her dog was an outside support, "*Uh she makes me happy when I am feeling lonely or upset or something…and I can tell her all my secrets.*" Other homeless youth mentioned their cats or riding horses as supportive. One youth stated, "*So my cat is the one who keeps me sane.*"

Subjective Happiness

Happiness was mentioned equally by 4-H and homeless shelter youth in response to what it means to have a good life in general. Both 4-H and shelter youth pointed out that their role models of success were often happy. There was, however, a marked difference in the way youth articulated their views on happiness.

4-H youth: *"Well, if you're happy and you're not hungry or starving and off the streets, that's pretty much successful."* 4-H youth simply mentioned that people who experience success are also happy with no further explanation. They frequently talked about happiness and enjoying what one does in the same sentence or exchange. One 4-H youth stated, *"They tend to do what they enjoy to do. Some people end up doing what they don't like to do. But they kind of tend to do what they want to do. So, they tend to be happier."*

Shelter youth: *"I think that to be happy you don't need things like money or food or shelter."* Contrastingly, many of the shelter youth's comments regarding happiness described a subjective-type of happiness; these youth recognized that being happy could be and means something different for each individual. For example, in describing the keys to happiness one youth at the shelter stated, *"Seriously [it] just*

depends on each person because everybody needs something different to make them

happy." Homeless youth tended to explain their meaning of happiness once the subject

was brought up and the shelter youth delve deep into the belief system behind happiness.

According to this homeless youth:

> *Happiness stems from a personal belief that you need to be happy like it stems*
> *from the idea that in order to be happy you have to do certain things and when*
> *you do those things that's what makes you happy or when you are in a certain*
> *place or that sort of thing.*

When one shelter youth mentioned a job and a house as goals for a good life,

another youth stated she did not need these aspects of life. The former youth then

acknowledged these were not the primary means to happiness, "*I am with you there*

though. I don't need a house or money to be really happy." Overall, 4-H youth and

homeless youth both viewed happiness as an indicator of doing well, but homeless youth

expressed a more philosophical view of happiness whereas the 4-H youth simply linked

happiness and success together.

Doing Well as Risk Avoidance – Shelter Youth: *"Stay out of trouble, don't do drugs*
and stuff like that."

When asked to describe someone who does well in life, participants from the

homeless shelter frequently gave examples of people who resisted negative behaviors.

One youth described his older brother as a positive example because of the following:

"*He didn't really get into drugs or drinking or partying or anything. I don't know, he*

never really disobeyed or did anything wrong really." None of the 4-H youth mentioned

this avoidance of risky behaviors in their descriptions of successful people. Throughout

the rest of the interview several homeless shelter youth continued to tell stories of not

doing certain things as related to doing well in life (e.g., not *"doing drugs," "stealing,"*

or "being violent"). A common phrase used by the homeless shelter youth throughout the interview was "*stay out of trouble.*"

Moreover, youth from the homeless shelter had pointedly fewer comments than the 4-H youth about what their lives would be like if they were doing well. When homeless youth did describe a picture of their life as successful, it was with much less detail compared to 4-H youth. Altogether 4-H and homeless shelter youth talked at similar lengths about subjects except in response to the question about what their life would look like if they were doing well.

Synopsis

Although this paper focused on the differences between two groups of youth – 4-H and homeless – it should be acknowledged that the youth also expressed some similar opinions related to doing well (though these topics are not discussed in this paper). Overall, the most contrasting perspectives from the youth related to their strengths and sense of self. Homeless youth demonstrated more self-awareness as they cited personal qualities about themselves, rather than what they had accomplished. They viewed stubbornness as a strength and were pleased with themselves for not yielding to peer pressure. The college-application driven culture of the 4-H youth did not appear to have great influence on the shelter youth's lives. 4-H youth were more aware of the steps parents and schools wanted them to take to succeed, as opposed to their own personal attributes that might lead to success. 4-H youth focused on numerous activities and advanced classes, even when this culminated in increased pressure to please others and feelings of inadequacy. Contrastingly, the homeless youth exhibited self-confidence by not worrying about what other's thought of them. They viewed resisting negative

behaviors as connected to doing well. Although the homeless shelter youth conveyed strong articulations of their personal strengths, they struggled with envisioning a successful future for themselves. Also, 4-H youth felt strongly supported by their parents, whereas shelter youth were ambivalent about the inconsistent support of their parents. Yet, homeless youth found other sources of support, such as shelter staff, siblings, other adults, or pets. Overall, both samples of youth wanted to be happy in life even though they characterized happiness in different terms.

Discussion

Hearing from youth directly can be an effective strategy for enhancing theory and programming on youth development (Pope, 2011; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). The study's juxtaposition of two samples of youth allowed for the investigation of similarities and differences among youth's articulations of strengths and positive development. Substantial differences emerged in the way shelter and 4-H youth conceptualized their own strengths, pressure to do well, family support, meanings of happiness, and risk avoidance. In particular, the study's findings about youth's sense of self, external supports, and perspectives on risks reveal how youth used their internal resources to regulate environmental interactions in unique ways. Identifying the contributors to adaptability and health promoting characteristics that are distinctive to shelter youth's contexts compared to other youth is important. Recognizing such resiliency supports the developmental systems model and contextual theories (Lerner, 2009).

Homeless youth in this study generally demonstrated heighted self-awareness compared to the 4-H youth; this stronger sense of self may be linked to contextual differences in the youth's lives. Research on homeless youth only recently started to

include studies with a strengths-based lens (Bender et al., 2007; Cleverley & Kidd, 2011; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Rew et al., 2001). This previous research has acknowledged homeless youth's resourcefulness, self-reliance, peer networking, and street smarts (Hyde, 2005; Kennedy, Agbényiga, Kasiborski, & Gladden, 2010; Rew et al., 2001; Theron & Malindi, 2010). These select studies focus on what specifically helps youth and contributes to resiliency while being homeless.

The strengths youth described in this study, however, differed from the strengths found in past studies. As opposed to previous studies that focused on strengths in relation to being homeless, this study's questions were not framed around youth's homeless status, for the exact same questions were asked of both 4-H and homeless youth. Rather, the youth in this study were asked about their strengths as young individuals. This broader approach widens the scope of acknowledging possible strengths in homeless youth. By not letting the youth's homeless statuses characterize them, these youth had thoughtful remarks about their attributes in general and how they worked to improve themselves. Some assets helpful for the homeless youth, such as stubbornness and not caring about others' opinions, may be beneficial in a street context, but undervalued by social structures, such as school or family.

When comparing the personal strengths perceived by the shelter youth, to the more accomplishment based strengths noted by the 4-H youth, it could be that homeless youth are forced to use their internal assets in a heighted degree compared to youth of higher social class. It is possible that the difficulties homeless youth face requires them to rely on internal strengths as more traditional resources throughout their ecologies – parental support, financial means, and housing – are likely lacking (Bender et al., 2007).

Furthermore, living homeless may provide more of a chance for the youth to 'know

oneself' as they live outside the home without supervision (Kidd & Davidson, 2007;

Rew, 2003). Youth of similarly low economic statuses are sometimes adultified in their

context as they take care of others and themselves without adult supervision or guidance

(Burton, 2007). Homeless youth may experience this adultification prior to being

homeless, while they are homeless, or when they realize they can take better care of

themselves than their parents or guardians (Rew, 2003). These experiences away from

home and with independence may lead homeless teens to a deeper awareness of their

identities. Similarly, the homeless youth in this study seemed to have views of happiness

that were adjusted to fit their circumstances more accurately. As these youth explore

their sense of self, they also have to consolidate and work out meanings of life and

happiness within the homeless environment. The 4-H youth, however, plausibly did not

need to reflect further upon happiness, as many of their lives seemingly fit society's

expectations of a good life.

Currently, not enough research exists on the identity development of homeless

youth apart from their identities linked to their homeless status. As identity processes are

a hallmark of adolescence and young adulthood, further investigations of identity topics

in this population should be pursued (Kidd & Davidson, 2007). Also, helping youth

understand how to use their existing assets across multiple contexts – both on and off the

street – can help them navigate the complexities of the teenage years. Making

institutions aware of the unique strengths homeless youth possess may help lessen the

social stigma street youth face (Kidd, 2007). If the study's findings can be replicated, it

is possible that affirming and acknowledging youth's unique strengths – stubbornness as

well as their insights on their identities and happiness – could benefit programs that work with youth. Understanding these characteristics of homeless youth could be useful in developing programs and shelter methodology (Theron & Malindi, 2010).

According to past literature on homeless youth, they experience more family disruptions, conflict, abuse, and poor parenting compared to resident youth (Bao et al., 2000; Kennedy et al., 2010; Kidd, 2006; Mallet et al., 2005; Slesnick, 2004). In line with the findings of these past studies, homeless youth in the current study reported little or inconsistent parental support in their environments. The differences in family support between the homeless and 4-H youth in this study may be related to future outcomes of the youth, given the wealth of literature on the importance of parenting and family in youth's lives (Dmitrieva, Chen, Greenberger, & Gil-Rivas, 2004; Hair, Moore, Garrett, Ling, & Cleveland, 2008; Steinberg, 2001).

However, the findings from the focus groups highlighted homeless youth's adaptation to their circumstances by allowing them to seek out more health-promoting relationships with others where their ecologies lacked. Many of the homeless youth mentioned other adults who cared for and supported them. Previous research suggests that non-parental mentors can also provide warmth, support, and guidance to youth (DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Werner & Smith, 2001). Finding more ways for caring adults to be a part of homeless youth's lives may lead to more positive reciprocal adult-child relationships, linked to positive youth outcomes (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). Understanding further how adult supportive relationships with homeless youth can be fostered, despite homeless youth's high degree of mobility and lack of parental involvement, is paramount (Tierney & Hallet, 2010).

This study also identified the important roles that siblings and pets can play in supporting some homeless youth, in lieu of parental bonds. Other research has found that children from low-income environments tend to have stronger relationships with siblings (Lareau, 2011); this may be true of homeless youth as well. The siblings the youth mentioned may also have acted as surrogate parents to the youth, a role sometimes taken on by lower-income youth (Burton, 2007). Additionally, supportive bonds with pets have been found in past studies on homeless populations (Bender et al., 2007; Rew et al., 2001). Future investigations might explore the unique roles and dynamics of siblings and pets in homeless youth's lives.

Finally, homeless youth in this study tended to view a lack of risk behaviors in their lives and others' lives as synonymous to doing well. Interestingly, this view of well-being as merely a lack of problems has dominated much of the past literature on teens (Lerner, 2009). Researchers on adolescence have aimed to change this view also knowing that positive expectations of the youth can lead to future positive outcomes (Benson et al., 2006; Gutmann, Schoon, & Sabates, 2012; Lerner, 2009; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). This view held by the homeless teens, however, makes sense given the heightened risk factors associated with homeless youth's contexts (Bao et al., 2000; Kidd, 2004; Mallet et al., 2005). 4-H youth, in turn, may be unique in embracing a positive development paradigm since 4-H relies heavily on positive youth development programming (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). It should be noted that this comparison is not only homeless youth and non-homeless youth, but homeless youth and youth involved in a 4-H program. Youth involved in 4-H have been distinguished as youth who tend to have more positive outcomes, such as healthier habits, stronger academic competence,

and more civic engagement compared to other youth (Lerner & Lerner, 2013).

Limitations

This study was done with a small purposive sample in one U.S. county; thus, the findings are not easily generalizable (Patton, 2002). This study included a marginalized sample, however, that offers a unique perspective on positive development. Similar research on other populations of marginalized youth (i.e., youth in foster care, the juvenile justice system, and youth who are chronically ill) should be considered for future studies. There may also be differences in newly homeless youth compared to long-term homeless youth, urban or more rural, as well as homeless youth who do not have access to shelter resources (Milburn et al., 2009; Theron & Malindi, 2010). Additionally, a few of the findings are supported in the literature on lower-income youth (Burton, 2007; Lareau, 2011; Tierney & Hallet, 2010); understanding the unique impacts of being homeless above and beyond being a lower-income youth should be explored further. The setting where the youth were interviewed could also have contributed to observed differences between the two samples because the 4-H youth because 4-H youth were interviewed in a 4-H program office and homeless youth were interviewed in shelter setting. Each of the focus groups included a range of ages similar to that in the overall sample. Yet, the mean age difference between the samples could have contributed to the heightened self-awareness observed in the homeless sample.

Conclusion

While adults often look for prescriptions and concrete steps that might lead to positive development or improve resilience in youth, finding such a broad based formula often masks the unique contributions of each individual and distinct groups of youth

(Kidd & Davidson, 2007). The study's findings of what is important to youth in life and the meaning they attribute to a good life, however, adds to the overall picture of understanding pathways to resiliency and positive development. The unique perspectives and comparisons between two samples of youth captured in this study offer new insights into how positive development for youth is understood according to their own views and distinctly between two groups of youth. This study found differences related to sense of self, external supports, and risk avoidance that reflect the individual-context (i.e., family, shelter, 4-H programs, school) relations of their lives (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These differences may inform youth development frameworks and strengths-based approaches regarding homeless and other at-risk youth by acknowledging the unique strengths and perspectives of youth within their contexts.

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Table 1

Demographics by Homeless Shelter and 4-H Youth (N = 38)

	Shelter Youth			4-H Youth		
	Mean	(SD)	*n* (%)	Mean	(SD)	*n* (%)
Age[a]	16	(1.20)		14	(1.33)	
Perceived Family SES[b]	5.44	(2.25)		7.45	(1.47)	
Grades[c]	3.06	(0.90)		3.84	(0.37)	
Activity Participation[d]	2.97	(0.77)		4.04	(0.98)	
Race/Ethnicity						
Caucasian			12 (67.7%)			14 (70.0%)
Latino			3 (16.7%)			3 (15.0%)
Black			1 (5.6%)			
Pacific Islander			1 (5.6%)			
Native American			1 (5.6%)			1 (5.0%)
Multi-racial			1 (5.6%)			1 (5.0%)
Unknown			1 (5.6%)			4 (18.0%)
Family Structure						
Mother only			6 (33.3%)			1 (5.0%)
Father only			3 (16.7%)			1 (5.0%)
Both parents			6 (3.3%)			17 (85.0%)

Note. [a]Age range: *12-17.* [b]Percieved family SES: 1 = *worst off*, 10 = best off. [c]Grades: 1 = *mostly D's or below*, 2 = *mostly C's*, 3 = *mostly B's*, 4 = *mostly A's.* [d]Extracurricular activity: in the past year participated…1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few times*, 4 = *once a week*, 5 = *daily.*

Table 2

Open Ended Focus Group Questions and Prompts

1. Some people know of other kids or teens around them (maybe in your neighborhood, school, in your classes or maybe some of the kids you hang out with) who are doing well in most areas of their life. Do you know any kids like this? What are they like? What do you think it is that helps them do well?

2. What does it mean in general to have a good life?
   Prompt: What do you need to get there? What do you need to get that life? Steps to get there?
   Prompt: Now thinking about you specifically, what matters most to you in life?
   Prompt: What kind of qualities or characteristics do you think people need to do well in life? What about things in their personalities or the people around them that help them do well?

3. What kind of person would you be like if you were to do well in all areas of life? What sort of things would you do or change? What would help you to do well?
   Prompt: Why or why not is being a person who does well in life important or not important to you?
   Prompt: What areas of life do you think it is important to do well in? Why do you think this?

4. What do you think are your greatest strengths?
   Prompt: What strengths do you have that are outside of you? Like people, friends, any adults or maybe a place that helps you do well?

5. What kinds of things make it hard for you to do well?
   Prompt: Do you have anything [friendship-wise, health-wise, school-wise, or family wise – insert domain accordingly] that worries you? Do any of these things keep you from doing well?

A few researchers think that it is important for youth to have five specific things in order to do well. I'm going to explain them to you and show them to you on this paper. then I am curious to hear whether you agree or not that these are the most important things for teenagers to have in order for them to do well in life. Explain Five Cs.

6. Does this make sense to you? Do you think this might be true of teens or of you? Tell me why or why not.

7. Do the things I just mentioned seem similar to the things you mentioned on our list at the beginning of the focus group? Why or why not?

8. Is there anything else you want to add?

A Good Life: What Do Adolescents Say?

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Abstract

Adolescents' views of theories about their own development and well-being are not well understood because these theories are most often constructed by adults without reflection from adolescents themselves. Including youth's perspectives in research acknowledges their agency - a major tenet of the positive youth development framework, although not often included in research methodology. Therefore, using a youth-centered approach, adolescents' opinions and views on positive youth development, well-being, and success were sought through focus groups with 38 youth. Content analysis revealed youth's views of doing well in life were focused on the future and reaching their goals, including enjoyable careers and educational achievements. At the same time, they valued social skills and highlighted humor and humility in relating to people for success. A different interpretation of what is traditionally understood as character and used in the Five Cs of positive youth development – as related to doing well – was also put forth by the youth. Such findings augment current understandings of positive youth development and youth well-being by including adolescents' perspectives which may lead to more relevant programming for youth.

Keywords: positive youth development, well-being, teenagers' perspectives, child-centered

A Good Life: What Do Adolescents Say?

Theories on adolescent development are most often created by adults with limited

direct participation from adolescents themselves, except as research *subjects*. Little is

known about the way adolescents think about their own development and well-being or

actual theories on these subjects. Youth are sometimes viewed as "less than" adults in

terms of their path through development and are infrequently considered as experts on

their own personal growth, priorities, or needs (Hendrick, 2008; Woodhead & Faulkner,

2008). Theories related to youth, therefore, often develop in adult-centric ways. What

constitutes as positive development, well-being, and success are embedded in social

structures since the way all people perceive their lives is reflected in macro-level

structures including *culture* and *time* (Camfield, Streuli, & Woodhead, 2009).

Adolescents exist within their own youth *culture* as part of a broader culture and are

separated by *time* through age from adults, likely giving them a unique perspective on

positive development, well-being, and success. Examining youth's views is important

because their perspectives may not only be different from adults, but such consideration

also acknowledges their agency. The field of positive youth development, specifically,

promotes youth's agency – otherwise known as their ability to shape their lives as they

act upon their environments – as a major theoretical tenet (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, &

Sesma, 2006; Lerner, 2009). Researchers within positive youth development, however,

have yet to apply this principle systematically to research practices by emphasizing a

more prominent role for adolescents in studies on youth development.

Studies have shown that incorporating insights and feedback from youth –

allowing them to have a "voice" in both the construction of scientific research and as an

element of efficacy in youth programing – is important especially in areas related to youth's personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts (Hendrick, 2008; Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Youth's reports on personal matters such as their own positive development and well-being should be crucial to such social constructs (Ben-Arieh, 2005). Exploring youth's viewpoints, opinions, and feelings by allowing them to discuss what they consider as important, not only provides growing opportunities for youth and respects them as social actors, but is an effective strategy for improving interventions and programming on youth development (Ensign, 2004; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). Therefore, by considering youth's views on what it means to do well, develop positively, and have a good life this research provided an opportunity for youth "voice."

Commonalities exist within the literature on positive youth development, well-being, and the overarching field of positive psychology (Camfield et al., 2009; Lerner, 2009; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). These theories emphasize a departure from the medical- and deficit-only models and assert that well-being and healthy development are more than the mere absence of disorders and illness. They also emphasize individuals' agency as important to development (Camfield et al., 2009; Lerner, 2009; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). In part to uphold youth's agency, some researchers on youth well-being have recognized a gap in research that tends to exclude youth's perspectives; this gap also exists within the field of positive youth development. These researchers have critiqued studies that position youth as *objects*, as opposed to *subjects* or *participants* (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Christensen & James, 2008). Instead, they emphasize child-centered research advocating for youth's perspectives on life and how such perspectives may differ from adults (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Camfield et al., 2009; Zill & Brim, 1975 as cited in Lippman,

2007). They argue that in order to understand well-being in youth, the youth must be at the center of research and recognized as active members of society (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2007). Involving youth in research in this way values their often marginalized voices and their agency to act upon research and social structures.

Relatedly, the ideas behind positive youth development stress that youth are not only recipients of experiences but they co-create their experiences and this agency and engagement with contexts can lead to positive outcomes (Benson et al., 2006). Thus, youth development theories and practices could be informed by research on youth's well-being that emphasizes participants' perspectives. This would acknowledge youth's authoritative knowledge of their own experiences and meaning they ascribe to life (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2009). If youth development theory holds that youth agency is important, then it is valuable to determine how youth understand positive development.

Aside from youth's views, concepts related to well-being and positive youth development have been framed in many ways, including descriptors such as having a good-life, thriving, and flourishing as well as specific indicators, such as positive self-concept, educational achievement, happiness, one's best interests, quality of life, or the Five Cs – described below (Camfield et al., 2009; Lerner et al., 2005; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Moreover, researchers have put forth various frameworks to articulate what youth need for positive development and well-being above and beyond the absence of problems (Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011; Benson, 1997; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Land, Lamb, & Mustillo, 2001; Land, Lamb, Meadows, & Taylor, 2007; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Specifically related to positive youth development, Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2000) recommended five key elements as critical to healthy development in youth (Lerner et al.,

2000; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Lerner et al., 2005). The five elements, known as the Five Cs, suggested by Lerner and colleagues (2005) are Competence, Character, Confidence, social Connections, and Caring. These constructs have been investigated through numerous papers on the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (PYD) by Lerner and colleagues (2005) (Alberts et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010); however, these studies have been primarily deductive and based on previously developed questionnaires that did not consider how diverse subsections of adolescents themselves view their positive development (Vo & Park, 2009). Though useful, and easily understood by those who deliver youth programming, the validity of the Five C constructs is limited because there were few data collected on whether the Five Cs are consistent with the way adolescents conceptualize the nature of positive development, well-being, and success. Without youth's views, the importance of their agency is tempered and an opportunity is missed to make theories used in programming more relevant to the youth themselves.

To date, the only previous study that has interviewed youth about positive youth development used a specific sample of youth who were thought to have "exemplary positive development" (King et al., 2005). Two other studies have coded written narrative responses about the meaning of doing well, success, and spirituality (Alberts et al., 2006; Mariano, Roeser, Greathouse, & Koshy, 2012). These studies also admit to drawing on existing positive youth development labeling and theory to create categories in their qualitative analysis. Researchers have yet to reconcile the unprompted salience of views on positive youth development from diverse groups of teens.

Well-being researchers have also tried to identify the essential elements that

embody well-being for youth. In this pursuit well-being is recognized as socially and contextually bound (Camfield et al., 2009). Manderson (2005) asserts, "individual sense of wellbeing, therefore, is more than the subjective assessment of embodiment; rather, it is embedded in and derives from society itself, socially produced and sustained by social structures and systems" (p. 13). Well-being is a broad concept and its definition has been debated. Yet its social and contextual nature, agreed upon by researchers, lends itself to context specific studies and acknowledgement of research participants' views. Camfield and colleagues (2009) and Fattore and colleagues (2007) describe several approaches to studying children's well-being, including quality of life measures, domain specific measures, developmental health, comparing and contrasting 'state of the child' national and international indices, and the child-focused approach. The present study locates itself in the child-focused methodology. While some international studies on youth well-being use a child-focused approach (Camfield et al., 2009; Crivello, Camfield, & Woodhead, 2009; Fattore et al., 2009), very few studies exist on U.S. populations, specifically on American teens (Davidson, 2011). Additionally, given the range of approaches to study youth well-being, the field still lacks a common taxonomy of children's well-being (Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011). This study aimed to use a child-centered approach and bring forth more adolescent perspectives on well-being topics.

No consensus for youth, parents, and practitioners exists on what it means for youth to develop positively (King et al., 2005). Additionally, imposing adult or culturally irrelevant standards to youth's well-being does them a disservice by not recognizing their rights and agency. Therefore, through the use of qualitative methodology we aimed to contribute a more balanced and youth-focused view of positive development and well-

being to the on-going research on these subjects. Accordingly, focus groups were used to reduce the power inequities between researchers and youth by treating youth as the experts (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). The goals of this research were 1) to gather reflections from youth through focus groups on what constitutes doing well in life and 2) to solicit their reactions to the Five Cs of PYD concepts as elements of doing well.

Method

Qualitative research provides particularly reliable information about social experiences and opinions (Fattore et al., 2007). Focus groups are a qualitative method well suited for placing youth at the center of research by allowing youth participants to express and discuss their opinions, emotions, and experiences with one another with limited interaction by the interviewer (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Morgan, 1997). Through discussion, youth are able to elaborate on others' views and agree or disagree with one another indicating whether a viewpoint is widely shared (Barbour, 2007); this provides a large amount of data in the youth's own words (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This type of youth-centered research also decreases power inequities between youth and adults and takes a human rights perspective on children as keepers of authoritative knowledge on their lives (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Fattore et al., 2007).

Participants

Youth were recruited for focus groups from two primary sources – the local county's 4-H program and a local homeless shelter – using purposive sampling. After IRB approval for all procedures, homeless shelter youth were recruited through their involvement and residence at a homeless shelter. The shelter provides overnight shelter services focusing on paths out of homelessness and life skills for up to 12 youth at a time,

ages 10-17. These youth come to the shelter through a variety of paths, including referrals from other social service agencies, juvenile and mental health departments, schools, self-referrals, and parent-referrals. The staff at the shelter agreed to include the focus groups as part of youth's optional activities that take place after school and on weekend evenings. During the scheduled activity time, the researcher visited the shelter and asked the youth if they would like to participate in the focus groups. The 4-H youth were recruited at a large 4-H event where the youth were informed about the study and asked to participate. A 4-H agent also forwarded an email from the researcher to all parents of the county's 4-H youth about the study and interested families contacted the researcher directly. The 4-H program is a national youth development program – the largest out-of-school youth program in the U.S – administered by local Land Grant Universities. 4-H emphasizes programs in science, healthy living, and food security that empower youth. Studies have shown that youth involved in 4-H programs fair better on several positive outcomes, such as healthier habits, stronger academic competence, and more civic engagement compared to other youth (Lerner & Lerner, 2013).

Thirty-eight youth participated in the focus groups, including five groups from the homeless shelter and five groups from the 4-H program. Previous research on focus groups indicates that three to five groups are adequate for saturation; however, because two populations of youth were involved supplementary groups were added for adequate saturation (Morgan, 1997). Groups ranged from three to six youth and included both male ($n = 13$) and female ($n = 23$) participants; additionally, two youth marked other for their gender.

Participants' ages ranged from 12 to 17 years of age ($M = 15$, $SD = 1.5$). Most of

the youth reported themselves as Caucasian (68%) with 16% identifying as Latino and two youth identified as Native American, one youth identified as Black, one youth as Pacific Islander, two as multi-racial, and four youth marked unknown/other. Two youth did not report ethnicity. Youth were asked to describe their perceived family's socioeconomic status by placing the status of their family, in terms of level of education, jobs, and money within their community, on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the *worst off* and 10 being the *best off* (M = 6.5, SD = 2.0). Sixty-one percent of youth were raised by both parents, 18% of youth indicated being raised solely by their mother and 11% were raised solely by their father. One youth in each category indicated being raised by another guardian, by both parents and their grandparents, and both parents but separately. Fifty-percent of homeless shelter youth reported they did have a place they considered their home; 44% indicated they had no place to live; one youth did not answer. These youth reported being homeless for various lengths of time ranging from 1 week to 6 months. All 4-H youth indicated they lived in a home.

Procedure

Homeless youth focus groups took place in the dining room of the homeless shelter where youth were residing. The 4-H youth focus groups took place at the local 4-H Extension site meeting room. Each youth received a short background questionnaire before the discussion began and a $15 gift card for attending. The groups lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. Focus groups were recorded using a digital voice recorder.

The discussions were in a semi-structured interview format with a general outline of questions and probes asked by the researcher. As in one-on-one interviews, the semi-structured format allows interviewees more freedom in what they disclose and the

researcher can highlight certain themes from the free speech of the participants (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Interview questions focused on what it means to do well, role models who do well, what comprises a good life, youth identifying their strengths, and reflections on the Five Cs of PYD (See Table 1). The same questions were asked of both homeless and 4-H groups. Notes on body language, interaction, and social cues were also taken for post hoc evaluation of transcripts, notes, and recordings (Morgan, 1997). The researcher had vast experience working with adolescents in after-school youth programs and with homeless youth.

Data Analysis

The recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and a content analysis of the narrative responses was conducted. The majority of transcripts were transcribed by the researcher except for three that were professionally transcribed. More formal analyses occurred after reading through the transcripts and listening to the recordings several times. The transcriptions were then imported into and analyzed in MaxQDA[10], a software package designed for the use of text-based qualitative data analysis.

Guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2003), the researcher allowed codes to emerge from the data through the words and quotes of the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Emergent themes were documented and sub-grouped under headings with special attention to themes that were mentioned with frequency or appeared particularly salient through the use of strong language, emotion, or interaction among the youth (Barbour, 2007). In further analysis, codes were revised as patterns, trends, discrepancies, and the frequency of codes were examined (Patton, 2002). Themes were originally developed without designations of which transcripts were from

4-H or shelter groups in an attempt to make the research semi-blind to the subgroup distinction, aside from the researcher's memory of the discussions. Later, codes that were mentioned by all youth were highlighted by a matrix with themes on one axis and focus group categories – 4-H or homeless – on the opposing axis. Themes that occurred for both youth samples were flagged and then grouped by overarching topics. In a few categories, although youth raised the same general topics, there were large discrepancies in the way they talked about these topics by subpopulation. This was noted and analyzed (primarily within the education category). The findings below represent the topics that overlapped and were discussed most prominently by both samples of youth.

Findings

This paper examines youth's perceptions of what it means to do well in life, including youth from a 4-H program and a homeless shelter. Focus group interview questions centered on meanings of doing well and opinions on the positive youth development framework – the Five Cs of PYD (Lerner et al., 2005; see Table 1 for interview questions). The qualitative analysis generated three main themes including two subcategories. The themes below represent the most salient and pronounced topics discussed by all youth including future orientations (i.e., goals, good jobs, and educational attainment), sociability, and the meaning of character.

Future Orientations

Goals. Reflections about goal-setting and achieving arose prominently in the participants' discussions of doing well in life. Goals were frequently mentioned in relation to youth's role models of success as the youth were aware that goals and being "*goal-oriented*" were a key aspect of their models' good lives. Youth portrayed their

role models as, *"she is very sure, like when she has her mind set on something she makes sure it gets done"* and *"she also really wants to do well and she knows where she's going. She says she wants to be a teacher."* One friend was described as, *"I have a friend who's going to college and he's really smart, like he knows what he's gonna do, he's in a band, he's got a pretty good start, so I guess he's successful in his life."*

Youth noted that individuals need to know their goals and what they want in order to do well in life: *"you like gotta know what you're doing"* and *"you have to be like a strong people, if you know what you want then you have to go for it. Because I don't think like, a lot of people don't actually get where they wanna be in life. Ever."* Another youth described, *"You don't just grow up and oh this is where I want to be. You have to ask yourself like day to day, is there where you want to be?"* Not only was knowing one's goals important, but taking action upon these goals was referenced many times by the youth. One youth declared:

> *It's all about your will. If you want something hard enough and you want something enough then you're gonna go out and do it. But if you're just kinda like 'oh, I wanna do that.' Like if say you wanna do that but don't do anything to do it, then nothing's gonna happen.*

Many youth talked about the importance of small or short-term goals that help fulfill their large and long-term goals. Several youth also mentioned the topic of goals specifically related to education. *"I am a huge planner, so I can't wait to get to college so I can start making new goals, like now college is the goal, and once I get there I can start making new goals for the future."*

Good jobs. Youth mentioned external aspects of doing well and traditional markers of transitioning into adulthood – completing school and finding a job – more than any other topics throughout the interviews. It was common for youth to describe

others they knew who were doing well as holding either a "*good*" or "*enjoyable*" job as a

facet of the person's success. When discussing the youth's future endeavors, the youth

qualified the idea of having a job through various descriptions such as, wanting a "*good*

job" (most common phrase), "*successful career*," "*stable career*," "*job to make lots of*

money," "*fun job*," and "*enjoyable job that gets you a house.*"

Youth were idealistic about having a job that they would enjoy; visions of a good

life included involvement with activities and jobs they were passionate about. As such,

one youth described her view of doing well as aiming for a satisfying job in the future:

> *You also need to be passionate. I mean I can take that class and it doesn't feel like*
> *a class to me, it feels just more like something I want to do and I think you need*
> *that to be able to be successful. I mean, yeah you're gonna end up having jobs*
> *that you don't like, but I think your goal should be to have a job that doesn't really*
> *feel like, 'oh my gosh I gotta go to work today.' It needs to be like, 'ok I'm going*
> *and I'm enjoying what I do.' I know that's not possible, or it's really hard for*
> *everyone to get that. And maybe just to make that your goal to get there.*

Only a few youth mentioned wanting to help others through their job.

Additionally, a few youth did mention wanting to support themselves or their families

with their jobs as well, such as:

> *I think you also need like a second job. You need to be able to do something to get*
> *economic I guess. Then keep, in America you can't do anything without money. I*
> *mean now you can't, bad thing 'cause if the economy really crashes I don't know*
> *what we're gonna do, 'cause everything is literally based on money. I think you*
> *really need a job and money to keep you supported.*

However, youth primarily talked about their work being personally fulfilling and even

fun. Youth also questioned the lives of people they knew who did not like their jobs.

The youth exhibited a strong sense that they did not want to turn out like such people:

> *I don't really know any people that I would consider like successful. Cause to me*
> *successful is like you know, you get what you want in life, you do like what you've*
> *always dreamed of doing. You get your dream job. You do what you wanna do,*
> *you know? And you make yourself like open, and you make yourself a way to get*

there. And most people I know, I mean like teachers and parents, I mean I guess if you want to be a teacher, then my teachers who are there I guess they're successful. But a lot of them it seems like that's like their fallback.

One youth described that life should not only be about work: *"To have fun and uh just don't be like one of those people that works in the office all day and doesn't do anything but work. Just keep relationships with people and have fun."* Another youth described his fear of having a boring job, *"well, I want to have fun and I really don't want it to be boring, like if you've ever watched The Office. All the people are just bored all day."* Another youth acknowledged that jobs might be challenging but still held the ideal of an enjoyable job, *"at the start, you may not get the job you really want, but I think you should stick with that job and then go find other jobs that you might want."*

Education. Youth's commentary on what it means to do well in life in general and for them personally was unequivocally about education. School related topics were cited in response to all interview questions and also as an addition to the Five Cs. Getting a good job was also linked to education from the youth's perspectives. They often saw the steps of education and careers happening together such as, *"Doing well in school [is important]. So you can go to college and most people who graduate from college can get a good job"* and *"having a good education will help you have a good life because it will help you earn money and help you."* Another youth stressed the importance of work and school, *"You got to get a job obviously. Like to provide for yourself. You gotta get the right education. You gotta know what to do. You gotta know what to major in and minor in. You gotta know all this stuff."*

Youth were also highly cognizant that for the people they saw as doing well in life, education was a factor in this success. The majority of individuals referenced by the

youth were characterized as earning *"good grades"* or *"graduating high school or college"* or *"attending college"* or had *"earned a degree."* One youth stated, *"I was thinking of someone, he takes the hardest classes. This is actually two people, they get the perfect grades, taking the hardest classes and they are perfect at other things they do, and I don't know how they sleep."* Other youth described the school achievements of several role models: *"She is really responsible; she's gone far in school. Like she's done really good in high school so she got to a really good college."*

Additionally, youth noted that education was missing from the Five C constructs as a distinct aspect of doing well. Several of the youth also talked about a need to do better in school to do well. One youth explained exactly what was important for her to accomplish in school, *"the person I want to be, I have to be successful in school and for me that does not include a GED. I don't think people who get GEDs are failures but for me it would be a personal failure."* Another youth declared, *"I think I am doing okay for the most part except for a little bit more in school, I need to do better in school. I'm not working to my full potential."* Moreover, the youth indicated that school and education were areas of life that mattered most to them.

Different articulations of education. Although education was the most discussed topic among all focus groups, the way youth articulated their ideas about education varied between the 4-H and homeless youth focus groups. 4-H youth seemed to have a sense of the steps involved in the educational process. The 4-H youth portrayed an understanding of the hierarchy of tasks that could assist them for succeeding in school, such as, *"getting to college, getting grades and getting the degrees to do what I want to do as a job. So that means now getting good grades, good study habits, staying healthy so all those*

things can plan into the rest of life." Contrastingly, the shelter youth only mentioned that school in and of itself was important for success.

   Highest level classes and parental support. 4-H youth also mentioned an urgency to push themselves in school and be in the highest level classes while, at the same time, some disapproval of being in lower or normal level classes. Taking higher level classes was associated with a certain social status for the youth that implied for them that they cared about school. Several youth also expressed not wanting to take hard classes but feeling pressured to take them. 4-H youth also felt, at times, they were not challenged enough in school and wanted to be challenged more. This feeling was not expressed in the homeless youth groups.

   4-H youth also talked about support from their parents connected to school and parents' encouragement for them to take harder classes. One 4-H youth exclaimed, *"Yeah I think if I stopped doing my homework, I think my parents would go insane [other youth are saying yeah in agreement], I would be grounded, no car, no friends, no nothing. Homework means everything*." One 4-H youth described how her parents prioritize school for her, *"I do plenty of activities and my parents are like, if you can't keep up in school, things are going to change. School is the first thing."* Homeless youth never or rarely mentioned family in relation to topics about education, much less any type of support from family for education.

Sociability

   4-H and shelter youth also frequently discussed sociability as a characteristic of people who do well and vital to a good life such as, *"I think being really optimistic and good with people is really important."* Youth used various vocabulary to describe the

people who do well in life as social, but all participants emphasized that some kind of sociability was an important aspect of their success. One youth stated the following about his role models, *"they are really charismatic. They are really good with people, they are just good at talking to people."* Other role models were described as, *"they are kind of the person you want to be around and you enjoying being around them.*"

Humor and humility. Humor also frequently emerged as a topic when youth talked about the importance of being social. One youth explained how his friend appropriately uses humor, *"This person, I think he's always open-minded, he's really nice, and he knows when it's the right time to make a joke. He always tries hard. He never tries to be nagging and he always wants to make new friends*." Another youth explained how humor played a part in her role model's social aptitude:

> Youth: *And she's just like, super pretty and like everyone loves her. She's like a really good student in school.*
> Interviewer: *Cool. Why do you think everyone loves her?*
> Youth: *Cause she's just like super funny and really good with people. Like she can adjust to any person like, yeah, she gets along with everyone.*

Youth also distinguished the restraint of arrogance as important to doing well. One youth described the balance of confidence and arrogance as, *"people like you when they talk to you and kind of people [in general] think that you're good at what you do but at the same time you don't make them feel inferior.*" Another youth expressed similar sentiments, *"because he is one of those people that, well, he is charismatic but he doesn't, he is not overconfident."* One youth stated, *"It's not just that she's talented, it's that she doesn't rub it in your face…Confident in such a way that she doesn't appear cocky, not stuck up.*"

Social support. Related to sociability, several of the youth mentioned a need for social support to do well. One youth articulated the need for social systems this way:

> *To be able to have a support system. I mean it doesn't have to be just family and like friends, teachers, counselors, I don't know, but definitely a support system 'cause that will help you reach your goals and will also be there when maybe you make a mistake and you need some, you know, someone to lean on. Yeah anybody who wants to be successful needs a support system.*

One youth described her awareness and the tension of her family being successful on one hand, but unsuccessful in terms of social support:

> *My whole family is full of successful women and successful men, but at the same time we're so cold with each other. I mean yeah we need money so it's work first, then family. But I mean it goes back farther to my great grandparents where everybody, yeah we're successful but we're not. We look successful to other people, we look happy, we look intact, but when it comes down to all of the deep stuff too we really need to have good emotional stability with our family and be able to have friends. Because my mom doesn't really have any friends. And that's not because she's a mean person it's just she doesn't really have time.*

The Meaning of Character

At the end of the focus group interviews youth were asked to respond to the descriptions of Lerner's Five Cs of PYD and asked whether they felt these were indeed the characteristics people need to do well. Youth were given a paper with a list of the Five Cs and corresponding definitions, while the researcher also verbally explained each C. Youth had varying opinions about the Five Cs – some youth noticed that the Five Cs were different than the topics they had already discussed related to doing well, some youth thought that only a few of the Cs were important to doing well, some thought individuals would not need all the Cs to succeed, and a few agreed that the Cs seemed appropriate for what youth need to do well. Due to space limitations, only the construct of character is discussed here because of youth's animated response to the subject. Even though the definition of character was displayed before the youth (e.g., respect for social and cultural norms, has a sense of right and wrong), many objected to the meaning of character as given to them and described character in their own way.

Character as personality. Youth primarily defined character as individuals' personalities and overall "*who people are*." An equal number of 4-H and shelter youth described character this way and most of the focus groups as a whole agreed the meaning of character was in essence a person's personality. This exchange with the interviewer displayed a vast majority of the youth's understanding of character:

> Youth*: Character. I think people should be their own person.*
> Interviewer: *Okay, so what does character mean to you?*
> Youth: *It means kind of like personality.*
> Interviewer: *Okay, and you think it's important to have a personality.*
> Youth: *To have your own personality.*

In one instance a youth actually interrupted the interviewer's description of the Five Cs with his definition of character:

> Interviewer: *Okay and then there's character. Character means you have a sense of right and wrong, it's like you have moral values okay…*
> Youth: [Interrupting] *It means like who you are.*

Several other youth were upfront about disagreeing with the given definition: *"I, this is kinda not really how I think of character. Character is kinda like personality, and like, just personality."* Another pair of youth disagreed as well:

> Youth 1: *I think that's a bad definition for character.*
> Youth 2: *Me too I don't think…I don't get it.*
> Youth 1: *Where did you get these definitions from?*
> Interviewer: *Okay, well how would you define it?*
> Youth 1: *Character is like how someone plays.*

Character as relative. Another set of youth were more able to accept the given definition of character, however, they emphasized that character is relative. These youth rhetorically questioned who decides what is good and bad or right and wrong. Several mentioned that what is good for one person, could be damaging for another person or society. For example, one youth commented on the norms aspect of the definition:

But, like cultural norms that's like to a certain specific perception. Like is having legal marijuana, like is that a social norm? Sure it is here, but to an older generation is it? Like it's definitely not a social norm [to them] ... Yeah I think it's [character] probably following the norms of your own social group.

Another youth brought up the idea that societal, religious, and familial norms could be different for each person:

I think another thing too is like what society, what religion, or what they were raised in or what they grew up in because if their parents say it's okay to hit somebody, they're probably gonna think it's okay, 'cause I don't get in trouble at home' or cause it's what like your religion is or your society or what you live in.

The youth that agreed character was more than personality did not necessarily view character as representing anything inherently good. According to them character could be good or bad, as this youth specified, *"everyone has character it's just whether it's good or not. Like if you're mean and you hit people and stuff that's your character."* One youth even suggested adding the word "good" before character to clarify its meaning, *"I would like it to add good to the character because anyone can have character. But it might not be good character."*

Synopsis

Overall, youth had various opinions concerning the meaning of doing well in life. Knowledge of goals and goal attainment, which were often linked to education and careers, were a high priority for the youth in terms of success. The majority of youth spoke of good and enjoyable jobs and education as indicators of doing well. 4-H youth, however, indicated a clearer understanding of the steps involved in attaining their educational related goals. Youth also recognized aptitude with social skills as important to doing well. Most strikingly, the youth articulated a different understanding of character such that youth defined character as *"who individuals are."* Youth found it

important that people display their own unique personalities and did not see character as inherently good or bad.

Discussion

This study aimed to capture views of youth on their own development and well-being with specific recognition of differences between their perspectives and the prominent model of positive youth development, the Five Cs. Doing well in life was understood by the youth as goal oriented, hoped for achievements – high-quality and enjoyable jobs and educational attainment – as well as sociability. Moreover, youth did not identify with the concept of character as an aspect of a good life; some of the common topics discussed among the youth may indirectly relate to a few of the C constructs described briefly below.

Developmental researchers make a distinction between recognizing youth as "beings" and "becomings" (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Brim, 1975 in Lippman, 2007). Some researchers have emphasized the value of youth and children as "beings" in particular and steered away from pegging youth as incomplete until reaching certain milestones (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Furthermore, researchers have distinguished between well-being and well-becoming when considering childhood well-being (Fattore et al., 2009; James et al., 1998). As opposed to only assessing whether youth reach certain benchmarks as they age (i.e., educational attainment, employment, and marital status) – implying that they are inadequate before reaching such milestones – the emphasis is placed on the well-being in the present for youth and the validity of simply having youth's present lives be healthy and well (James et al., 1998; Jenks, 1996). Youth in this study, however, quickly placed themselves in the "becomings" category as they most frequently spoke of a good life and

doing well in futuristic ways. This was coupled with lengthy descriptions of school programs that assess their future careers and prioritize their college application resumes and may be related to the rhetoric around "well-becoming" that they hear from those around them.

The youth's views of themselves as "becomings" were most blatant in their emphasis on goals. A strong sense of working toward an ideal versus identifying doing well in the present was evident in the conversations with the youth. Their attention to goals, indeed, is consistent with the value some researchers place on goals in adolescents' lives. While goals are not directly a part of positive youth development rhetoric in the Five Cs, goals have been incorporated into ideas related to positive youth development through the constructs of competence and self-efficacy which are often described as a belief that one can achieve one's goals (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Furthermore, Lerner and colleagues (2010) have more recently pursued the *Selection, Optimization, Compensation* (SOC) model (Freund & Baltes, 2002) as it applies to the self-regulation necessary for positive development. This includes youth selecting goals, optimizing resources for reaching goals, and compensating or modifying goals based on a lack of resources or abilities as a primary propeller of youth development (Catalano et al., 2004; Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008). Youth's emphasis on their future selves might insist that doing well is unattainable until reaching their goals. However, both youth's present and future selves are important (Crivello et al., 2009). Thus, more conversations about success in the present might ensue with youth.

The goals most frequently mentioned by youth were related to good/enjoyable jobs and educational attainment. Youth stressed these forms of institutional human

capital factors (Barker, 2013) – education and career – over all other domains as essential

to doing well. A discrepancy seems to exist between the internal characteristics of the

Five Cs and the more external factors of education and jobs reported by the youth. These

external factors of education and career have not been as emphasized by positive youth

development studies. Descriptions within the job categories indicate a high-quality job

for the youth is one that provides enough money and is personally fulfilling by being

enjoyable and fun. Other research also confirms youth expressing a desire for compelling

careers (Davidson, 2011; Shek, Lam, Lam, & Tang, 2004; York-Barr, Paulsen, Kronberg,

Doyle, & Biddle-Walker, 1996). Unlike other studies, youth talked infrequently about

helping others or giving back. Other research on low-income youth reports youth

expressing a desire to give back to their community, while more middle class youth

report wanting jobs that connect with their specific interests and passions (Davidson,

2011). The youth in the present study align more closely with the latter group of youth,

even though half the participants were homeless.

While education and jobs were more prominently mentioned in the data, the youth

in the study attributed some of doing well in life to social capital factors. Past research

provides evidence that both human capital (e.g., education and job attainment) and social

capital are positively related to well-being (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). However, some

research shows a clearer link between social capital and well-being (Calvo, Zheng,

Kumor, Oligat, & Barkman, 2012; Coleman, 1988; Fergusen, 2006; Helliwell & Putnam,

2004; Manderson, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Moreover, "for adolescents, social capital is

especially important as a source of opportunities for development" (Hamilton &

Hamilton, 2004, p. 410). Having the skills to navigate different social systems is

imperative as networking helps young people in the diverse global economy. These skills also help them navigate their everyday world within educational situations, peer groups, family relationships, and mentor relationships and provide the catalyst type relations to reach their goals.

Additionally, youth emphasized the mastery of social skills as opposed to only the value of certain relationships, unlike other studies where youth spoke of the importance of particular relationships (Crivello et al., 2009; Fattore et al., 2009; Davidson, 2011). Youth's description of the need for sociability also seemed different from the connection construct in the Five Cs. Youth emphasized knowing *how* to make a connection over the specific relationships related to the connection domain. Some youth recognized the value of social support but social skills were the main subject of discussions including mentions of humor, humility, and friendliness. Indeed, research identifies that social competence is correlated with overall well-being and psychological functioning (Williams & Galliher, 2006). Likewise, social competence deficiencies are often related to unhealthy outcomes such as antisocial behavior, criminal activity, and other mental health issues (Merrell, Streeter, Boelter, Caldarella, & Gentry, 2001). Youth appear to appreciate the connection between social competence and positive outcomes and programming that addresses social competence, as many programs already do, may be particularly relevant to these youth.

More than any other construct of the Five Cs, the youth had palpably strong opinions about the concept of character. Ideas of character or a sense of moral capital did not emerge in their own free flowing discussions of a good life, unlike in other studies where moral decisions and social responsibility were described as an aspect of well-being and success by youth (Fattore et al., 2007; Mariano et al., 2012). Youth in the present

study only valued character as a component of the Five Cs in terms of being an individual with a unique personality, not someone that upholds society's values.

Character was not considered the accurate word to describe social responsibility and held little meaning for the youth. This finding invites the question of effectiveness in using this term in programming for youth. Such programs as Character Counts and character education, in terms of semantics, may hold little value for youth. One of the six goals of the U.S. Department of Education is to "promote strong character and citizenship among our nation's youth" (U. S. Department of Education, 2013). Yet, this may possess no direct meaning to the youth themselves. Understanding this concept from a youth perspective and/or putting this concept into language more familiar to the youth is likely to better help move forward the government's goals on character. Researchers and practitioners may need to further consider the ideas, words, and meanings that might encompass aspects of what is traditionally thought of as character for youth today. More meaningful conversations with youth about values, relativity, and norms in diverse populations might benefit youth, researchers, and practitioners.

Limitations

Several limitations of this research should be considered. Simply looking at youth as one category masks the differences among them (Roberts, 2008). This study helps gather the views of at least two samples of youth, but certainly more youth populations should also be represented. Additionally, the small sample does not make the findings easily generalizable (Patton, 2002). While this study highlights the free-flowing opinions of youth, more participation in the research process by the youth would be ideal, including checking categories with the youth, as well as having adolescents

analyze and collect data (Ben-Arieh, 2005). The location of the youth's residence and the focus groups near and in a university town could have also created bias toward discussions of goals, education, and careers.

Conclusion

The youth displayed abilities to articulate meaningful opinions about well-being and success. Conceptualizing positive youth development and youth well-being according to their own voices is in line with their rights as citizens and helps to align policies and programs with youth's views and assets. According to the youth, doing well in life meant knowing and attaining goals linked to educational achievement, enjoyable jobs, and sociability. When asked to compare their views of success to research on positive youth development, youth saw differences particularly in the area of character. This research shows how mismatched adult-centric concepts may be to youth and highlights the importance of capturing youth voice in research on youth that may go on to influence more effective youth policy and programming. Research that highlights youth's perspectives augments research on these matters from an adult's viewpoint and helps us understand positive youth development in a less adult-centric way. Youth's views of a good life may lead to how they tend to regulate their resources related to sociability, careers, education, and goals of success, so further exploration of their views is warranted. Moreover, youth's expectations of well-being now may translate into how they seek well-being in the future. Finally, how youth interpret doing well has an impact on their reactions and behaviors related to positive youth development and more consistently enveloping their views is a promising asset for youth programming and policy.

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Table 1

Open Ended Focus Group Questions and Prompts

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1. Some people know of other kids or teens around them (maybe in your neighborhood, school, in your classes or maybe some of the kids you hang out with) who are doing well in most areas of their life. Do you know any kids like this? What are they like? What do you think it is that helps them do well?

2. What does it mean in general to have a good life?
   Prompt: What do you need to get there? What do you need to get that life? Steps to get there?
   Prompt: Now thinking about you specifically, what matters most to you in life?
   Prompt: What kind of qualities or characteristics do you think people need to do well in life? What about things in their personalities or the people around them that help them do well?

3. What kind of person would you be like if you were to do well in all areas of life? What sort of things would you do or change? What would help you to do well?
   Prompt: Why or why not is being a person who does well in life important or not important to you?
   Prompt: What areas of life do you think it is important to do well in? Why do you think this?

4. What do you think are your greatest strengths?
   Prompt: What strengths do you have that are outside of you? Like people, friends, any adults or maybe a place that helps you do well?

5. What kinds of things make it hard for you to do well?
   Prompt: Do you have anything [friendship-wise, health-wise, school-wise, or family wise – insert domain accordingly] that worries you? Do any of these things keep you from doing well?

A few researchers think that it is important for youth to have five specific things in order to do well. I'm going to explain them to you and show them to you on this paper. Then I am curious to hear whether you agree or not that these are the most important things for teenagers to have in order for them to do well in life. Explain the Five Cs.

6. Does this make sense to you? Do you think this might be true of teens or of you? Tell me why or why not.

7. Do the things I just mentioned seem similar to the things you mentioned on our list at the beginning of the focus group? Why or why not?

8. Is there anything else you want to add?

Table 2

Additional Examples of Youth's Views of Doing Well and Character

Theme	Supporting quote
Goals	*I think [goals are important] so you know what to work towards. You can choose things, based on like where you want to go. You don't have to spread out like in school. You can choose classes for different areas you don't need to waste your time spreading out. You know exactly what you want. That's the other thing I thought of, I don't know if it's really a quality, but you need to be like allowed choice to be successful. You can't be forced into doing anything.* *I don't know, I think that is like the long term goal, but I guess like getting to the long term goal I guess there is other, like, now my goal is I want to be involved in like the community and leadership and stuff and also good grades and just be involved in a lot of other stuff. Cause my goal would be to get there to get into college and get scholarships. So it's not just be happy, it's also, I like what I do, but it is like push yourself to do even more so that you can do well in college.* *Make goals and you can have one big goal like I want to be a doctor, and then break them down into small goals. Like first I need to take these classes, and then graduate and undergraduate school and then move on, so. Which makes you feel good about small goals, like you're actually progressing, yeah you're, like oh wait I did that today or like I've finally done that. Or when they are really small goals so you feel like you're actually walking forward instead of in some stand still place.*
Education	*My older sister. She like travels the US a lot. She's actually in New York right now for like a meeting, and she got like the highest degree in college 'cause she's still doing school right now."* *She like takes all the super hard classes and gets straight A's and everything."* *Just keeping up in school so you can get into a good college and then get like a good paying job doing what you like to do."* *So you can go to college and most um people who graduate from college can get a good job.* *I think the general consensus is a push for college and especially I remember being in middle school and doing all that [career assessment] and sometimes they make you feel like college is everything, and you have*

to do this and you have to do this and you have to know what you are going to be and you know there are those moments that you have no ideas cause I have no idea and I have to apply to college in a year and I don't think, I feel like people don't really like the program [career assessment] but at the same time, I feel like they made me stress out more, because they were like, you should be a well-rounded person and you should figure out what you are going to do. And I hear from so many adults who are completely now people that are really successful and stuff "Well I didn't know until I was halfway through college what I was going to do, you don't need to figure it out." I think you opinion changes a lot as you go through high school. So I don't know.

Character   *Character means like having a good sense of humor, you can do well with others. You just have good character.*

To be a good person, to like not be like two-faced and like, yeah, just be the one person be who you are and like don't try to make yourself something that you're not.

Youth 1: *I think that makes up your character [humor] because I kind of think of someone with a good character as someone who's well-rounded and has um-*
Youth 2: *Makes people laugh in a good way.*
Youth 1: *Yeah but has a bunch of different good personality traits. I think having a good personality is also a big part of your character, kind of how you treat other people and how you interact with other people.*

Youth 3: *But people think different things about like character.*
Interviewer: *So what do you think character means? What does that mean to you all?*
Youth 3: *That people think like what they are and they don't really think about what other people think of their selves. They just know who they are.*

Character means basically overall who you are. And how your mind is in its space you know like character would be like if you are kind of mellow with everybody if you find joy in life, if you appreciate the little things, if you um laugh hard with people and stuff like that just a whole bunch of stuff like that that is a lot of character

Conclusion

This research provided the opportunity to examine alternative perspectives on positive youth development, strengths, and well-being from youth. In the field of positive youth development, youth's agency and empowerment are promoted. Conceptualizing positive youth development and youth well-being according to their own voices allows for expression of their agency even within theories. Notably, a current gap exists in the positive youth development research that includes diverse youth's perspectives. Including youth perspectives further confirms youth's rights as citizens and helps to align policies and programs with youth's views and assets. Moreover, while adults often look for prescriptions and concrete steps that might lead to positive development or improve resilience in youth, finding such a broad based formula often masks the unique contribution of each individual and distinct groups of youth (Kidd & Davidson, 2007). Including youth's views allows for the possibility of using their perceptions to inform programming in a way that makes it more relevant to them. Camfield and colleagues (2009) state, "engaging with children's experiences and perspectives is beneficial from an analytical as well as an ethical perspective as children are usually the best source of information on their daily activities" (p.83) and what is important to them. Youth perspective studies usually "give voice to vulnerable and otherwise invisible groups, challenge Western orthodoxies, and draw attention to contrasting perspectives between children and adults" (Camfield et al., 2009, pg. 84).

Accordingly, the youth in the YVPD study displayed abilities to articulate meaningful opinions about well-being and success in their lives. This study also discovered discrepancies between experiences and opinions by population of youth and

the prominent positive youth development constructs. The unique perspectives and comparisons between two samples of youth captured in the YVPD study offer new insights into how positive development for youth is understood according to their own views and distinctly between two groups of youth.

According to the youth in both samples and described in manuscript two, doing well in life meant knowing and attaining goals linked to educational achievement, enjoyable jobs, and sociability. Furthermore, when asked to compare their views of success to research on positive youth development, youth saw differences particularly in the area of Character. Developmental researchers make a distinction between recognizing youth as "beings" and "becomings" (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Brim, 1975 in Lippman, 2007). Youth in the current study quickly placed themselves in the "becomings" category as they most frequently spoke of a good life and doing well in futuristic ways. The youth's view of themselves as "becomings" was most blatant in their emphasis on goals and their strong display of working toward an ideal versus identifying doing well in the present. The youth's attention to goals is consistent with the value some researchers place on goals in adolescents' lives (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008; Lerner, Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers 2010). While goals are not directly a part of the positive youth development rhetoric in the Five Cs, goals have been incorporated into ideas related to positive youth development through the constructs of Competence and self-efficacy which are often described as a belief that one can achieve their goals (Catalano et al., 2004).

More specifically, the goals most frequently mentioned by youth were related to

enjoyable jobs and educational attainment. Youth stressed these forms of institutional

human capital factors (Barker, 2013) – education and career – over all other domains as

essential to doing well. A discrepancy seems to exist between the primarily internal

characteristics of the Five Cs and the more external characteristics of education and jobs

reported by the youth. These external factors of education and career have not been as

emphasized by positive youth development studies.

    While education and jobs were more prominently mentioned in the data, the youth

in the YVPD study attributed some of doing well in life to social capital factors. Other

research provides evidence that both human capital (e.g., education and job attainment)

and social capital are positively related to well-being (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004).

However, some research shows a clearer link between social capital and well-being

(Calvo, Zheng, Kumor, Oligat, & Barkman, 2012; Coleman, 1988; Fergusen, 2006;

Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Manderson, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Moreover, "for

adolescents, social capital is especially important as a source of opportunities for

development" (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006, p. 410). Having the skills to navigate

different social systems is imperative as networking helps them in the diverse global

economy. These skills also help them navigate their everyday world within educational

situations, peer groups, family relationships, and mentor relationships and provide the

catalyst type relations to reach their goals. Youth's description of the need for sociability

also seemed different from the Connection construct in the Five Cs. Youth emphasized

knowing how to make a connection over the specific relationships related to the

Connection domain. Some youth recognized the value of social support but social

aptitude was the main subject of discussions including mentions of humor, humility, and

friendliness.

More than any other construct of the Five Cs, the youth had strong opinions about the concept of Character. Ideas of character or a sense of moral capital did not emerge in their own free flowing discussions of a good life, unlike in other studies where moral decisions and social responsibility were described as an aspect of well-being and success by youth (Fattore et al., 2007; Mariano et al., 2012). Youth in the YVPD study only valued character as a component of the Five Cs in terms of being an individual with a unique personality, not someone that upholds society's values. Responsibility to abide by social norms or do good was seen as relative by the youth – they questioned who decides what is "good" and "bad" in terms of morality. Character was not considered the accurate word to describe social responsibility and held little meaning for the youth. While both populations of youth agreed upon the aforementioned topics, striking differences were also found among their discussions.

According to manuscript one, differences between the two samples of youth related to sense of self, external supports, and risk avoidance that reflect the individual-context (i.e., family, shelter, 4-H programs, and school) relations of their lives (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The findings suggested differences by youth population in their self-awareness – revealing homeless youth's deeper reflection on and connection to their identity compared to 4-H youth. This stronger sense of self by the homeless youth may be linked to contextual differences in the youth's lives, such as more independence and hardship. Homeless youth also more frequently cited their own personal characteristics as strengths opposed to the 4-H youth who spoke of their accomplishments related to activities. When comparing the personal strengths perceived

by the shelter youth, to the more accomplishment based strengths perceived by the 4-H youth, it could be that homeless youth are forced to use their internal assets in a heighted degree compared to youth in higher social classes.

It is possible that the difficulties homeless youth face requires them to rely on internal strengths as more traditional resources throughout their ecologies – parental support, financial means, and housing – are likely lacking (Bender et al., 2007). Furthermore, living homeless may provide more of a chance for the youth to 'know oneself' as they live outside the home without supervision (Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Rew, 2003). Relatedly, homeless youth also demonstrated deeper reflection on the meaning of happiness, although both groups emphasized happiness in connection to doing well in life. As the shelter youth explore their sense of self, they also have to consolidate and work out meanings of life and happiness within the homeless environment. The 4-H youth, however, plausibly did not need to reflect further upon happiness, as many of their lives seemingly fit American society's expectations of a good life.

Family and parent relationships were identified as factors important to doing well, yet homeless youth's views were also restricted by feelings of ambivalence toward family. This is in line with past research on homeless youth's families that reports they experience more family disruption, conflict, poor parenting, abuse, and drug addiction compared to resident youth (Kennedy, Agbenyiga, Kasiborski, & Gladden, 2010; Kidd, 2006; Mallet et al., 2005; Slesnick, 2004; Bao et al., 2000). The findings from the focus groups also highlighted homeless youth's adaptation to their circumstances by allowing them to seek out more health-promoting relationships with others where their ecologies

lacked. Many of the homeless youth mentioned other adults, siblings, and pets that supported them more so than the non-homeless youth. Understanding further how mentor, sibling, and animal relationships with homeless youth can be fostered, despite homeless youth's high degree of mobility and lack of parental involvement, is paramount (Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012; Tierney & Hallet, 2010).

Finally, homeless youth also conceptualized doing well as not taking part in certain behaviors and risk avoidance, contrary to 4-H youth. Interestingly, this view of well-being as merely a lack of problems has dominated much of the past literature on teens (Lerner, 2009). Researchers on adolescence have aimed to change this view also knowing that positive expectations of youth can lead to future positive outcomes (Benson et al., 2006; Gutmann, Schoon, & Sabates, 2012; Lerner, 2009; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). This view held by the homeless teens, however, makes sense given the heightened risk factors associated with homeless youth's contexts (Bao et al., 2000; Kidd, 2004; Mallet et al., 2005). 4-H youth, in turn, may be unique in embracing a positive development paradigm since 4-H relies heavily on positive youth development programming. The juxtaposition of two samples of youth answering the same questions allowed for the differences between them to be analyzed. These differences mentioned above suggest insightful observations about life by the youth that potentially could inform programming and policy.

Limitations

Several limitations of this research should be considered. Simply looking at youth as one category masks the differences among them (Roberts, 2008). This study helps gather the views of at least two populations of youth, but certainly more youth

populations should also be represented (e. g., youth in foster care, the juvenile justice system, and youth who are chronically ill). Additionally, the small sample does not make the findings easily generalizable (Patton, 2002). There may also be differences in newly homeless youth compared to long-term homeless youth, urban or more rural, as well as homeless youth who do not have access to shelter resources (Milburn et al., 2009; Theron & Malindi, 2010). Additionally, a few of the findings are supported in the literature on lower-income youth (Burton, 2007; Laureau, 2011; Tierney & Hallet, 2010); understanding the unique impacts of being homeless above and beyond being a lower-income youth should be explored further.

The setting where the youth were interviewed could also have created bias between the two populations of youth because 4-H youth were interviewed in a 4-H program office and homeless youth were interviewed in a therapeutic setting at a shelter. Also, especially ambitious 4-H youth may have self-selected into the study exaggerating differences between the populations. The location of the youth's residence and the focus groups near and in a university town could have also created bias toward discussions of goals, careers, and education. While this study highlights the free-flowing opinions of youth, more participation in the research process by the youth would be ideal, including checking categories with the youth, as well as having adolescents analyze and collect data (Ben-Arieh, 2005).

Future Directions and Implications

The study's findings of the meanings youth attribute to a good life add to the overall picture of understanding pathways to resiliency and positive development. Clearly, more studies should be conducted that include youth's perspectives for several

reasons: to determine if any of the findings could be replicated and to provide more

context and population specific studies. Asking youth about their opinions by specific

and diverse populations, might allow programs to be more individualized to the needs of

these youth populations. For example, if the YVPD study's findings can be replicated, it

is possible that affirming and acknowledging youth's unique strengths – as well as their

insights on their identities and happiness – could benefit programs that work with youth.

Understanding these characteristics of homeless youth could be useful in developing

programs and shelter methodology (Theron & Malindi, 2010). Those who design

intervention programs might find program benefits in communicating more with siblings

of homeless youth and providing shelters that incorporate animal visits, house pets, or

animal therapy. Social workers – shelter staff, parole officers, counselors – and educators

might help youth, including homeless and other marginalized populations better

understand that doing well entails more than avoiding risky behaviors in order to direct

them to more healthy expectations of themselves. Furthermore, currently not enough

research exists on the identity development of homeless youth apart from their identities

linked to their homeless status. As identity processes are a hallmark of adolescence and

young adulthood, further investigations of identity topics in this population should be

pursued (Kidd & Davidson, 2007). Overall, making institutions aware of the unique

strengths homeless youth possess may help lessen the social stigma street youth face

(Kidd, 2007). Contrastingly, learning more about the excessive pressure and feelings of

inadequacy of the 4-H youth potentially could benefit programs working with these

youth. Capitalizing on the existing family support they experience and focusing on

identity development for these youth may be areas for programs and policy makers to

investigate.

      The study's findings inform youth development frameworks and strengths-based approaches regarding homeless and other at-risk youth by acknowledging the unique strengths and perspectives of youth within their contexts. This research also revealed the contrast between adult-centric concepts and youth's views and underscores the importance of capturing youth voice in research. More research that highlights youth's perspectives should be pursued in addition to adult viewpoints and theories; combining such perspectives may be a promising asset for effective youth programming and policy.

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