Contextualized Positive Youth Development: A SWOT Analysis

Fons J.R. van de Vijver

Abstract An attempt is made to integrate the previous chapters of the book on Positive Youth Development (PYD). The integration takes the form of a SWOT analysis. It is argued that the main strengths of PYD literature are its study of positive aspects of youth development (in contrast to the more common deficiency-based approaches) and its attention for contextual factors, cross-cultural issues such as the delineation of universal and culture-specific aspects of PYD. The main weakness is the scarcity of models that link individuals and their environment; contextual analyses are usually ad hoc and not based on a model of the environment, such as developmentally relevant classifications of countries. The main opportunities are the extension of current models of PYD in a cross-cultural context, as amply illustrated in various chapters of this volume. The main weaknesses of the extant literature on PYD are its Western dominance and exclusive focus on positive aspects, thereby possibly neglecting negative consequences of adverse conditions.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is coming of age. Like positive psychology (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), PYD provides an alternative approach to mainstream psychology that sets out to overcome the focus on shortages and deficiencies of mainstream psychology by addressing positive aspects of human life. The current chapter does not provide an overview of literature in PYD, nor does it summarize the contributions of this rich volume. Rather, the chapter aims to provide a synthesis of contextual approaches that prevail in PYD, as described in the previous chapters, in the form of a SWOT analysis. Such an analysis is a tool that originates in the management literature aimed at improving strategic thinking in organizations (Armstrong & Taylor, 2017). SWOT is an acronym for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. By applying these four perspectives on my reading of PYD, I hope to contribute to the strategic positioning of this vibrant field.

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I describe each of the four aspects in turn, followed by a conclusion. The input for the strategic positioning has come from the chapters in this book.

Strengths

PYD has a number of strong features, many of which seem to be inherited from developmental science. Many chapters in this volume not only acknowledge but explicitly address contextual issues in their theorizing and conceptual or statistical modeling of youth development. An interesting example is provided in the chapter by *Petrova and Schwartz*.[1] They argue that emerging adulthood may be culture bound, even more so than adolescence. Their thesis shows how far we have evolved beyond the traditional Piagetian position, the dogma when I was a student, that developmental stages are universal and that the only cross-cultural variation is the age of acquisition. Even if discussions about the culture-bound nature of certain phenomena, such as eating disorders (Keel & Klump, 2003) has not yet led to widespread convergence in views and the discussion on the status of culture-bound syndromes in transcultural psychiatry is far from settled (e.g., Westermeyer & Janca, 1997), it is an important step forwards to have these discussions and to no longer accept the implied universality of phenomena observed in Western countries.

There are various chapters in this volume that address the question of universality or generalizability of findings. These studies do not start from an implied universality (or the lack thereof), but test to what extent data support such universality. Most studies found support for the generalizability of constructs or relations between constructs. The reasoning behind these chapters (and many studies in the literature) is more or less as follows: we know from literature that a certain construct, measure, or set of associations is well-established in Western countries; however, our study took place in a very different cultural context, which makes it interesting to test the generalizability of Western findings. The first example can be found in the chapter by *Adams, Fischer, and Abubakar*. Starting from the observation that a positive correlation has been found between some personal values and well-being in many Western countries, they were able to establish similar relations in South Africa. *Buzea and Dimitrova,* studying emerging adults in post-communist Romania, found that positive moods predisposed their participants to feel that life is meaningful, thereby replicating findings in Western countries. *Gonzalez, Sinclair, D'Augelli, and Grossman* were interested in the link between extended family member support and negative parental reactions to coming out by LGB ethnic minority youth. The authors found support for the relevance of extended family support in all ethnic groups in a major U.S. metropolitan city. Their study shows that such family support is important across major ethnic groups in the US. Another study supporting the generalizability of findings is reported by *Aydinli-Karakulak, Baylar, Keleş, and Dimitrova*. Their sample involved Turkish-Bulgarian youth, who

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[1] Italicized author names refer to a chapter in this volume.

are often exposed to severe discrimination despite the very long immigration history of this ethnic group. They tested the applicability of Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden and Build Theory, which proposes that experiencing positive affect results in broadened thoughts and behaviors, which in turn facilitate adaptive responses to various environmental conditions, including negative ones. The authors found that positive affect was positively related to school engagement, as predicted by the theory. A final example supporting the generalizability of Western studies can be found in the chapter by *Mastrotheodoros, Talias, and Motti-Stefanidi*. These authors worked with Greek youth in a time when the country was in a deep financial crisis. Despite the crisis, Greek youth showed healthy goal orientation profiles. These youth remained focused on the long-term of their educational career, enjoying learning as it made them better persons, which has also been reported in Anglo-Saxon countries. The question can be asked what these studies add to the literature given that their results replicated findings done in mainly Anglo-Saxon countries. It is easy to underrate the importance of such studies. The contextual conditions in which the studies took place varied considerably from those of the original studies. As a consequence, the examples of generalizability studies described here provide evidence that the associations also hold in a new cultural context.

Still, cross-cultural studies would not be needed if all Anglo-Saxon studies generalized across the globe. Interestingly, this volume also offers examples of studies where generalizability was not found, amply demonstrating that such generalizability cannot be assumed and should be demonstrated. *Wiium* studied PYD among Ghanaian participants. She was interested in the question to what extent her participants experienced internal and external assets, viewed as essential to PYD. She concluded that the majority have not experienced external assets such as support and constructive use of time. The chapter is a strong reminder of the tremendous differences in contextual conditions of youth development. The author concludes that interventions should be aimed at making important assets more widely available in less affluent countries. Another example, though from a very different nature, can be found in the chapter by *Dimitrova, Chasiotis, Bender, and Van de Vijver*. They studied the association between identity resources and well-being among Turkish-Bulgarian and Muslim-Bulgarian adolescents. In line with the Anglo-Saxon literature, they found that identity and well-being are positively related. However, they found an interesting difference between Bulgarian identity and collective identity in the two groups. Whereas in the Muslim-Bulgarian group a strong, positive link was found between the two identities, the link was not significant in the Turkish-Bulgarian group. The authors reasoned that this could be a consequence of the limited value of the Bulgarian identity for the latter group. Their Bulgarian identity is apparently not a resource for this severely discriminated group. This finding seems to imply that we cannot simply take for granted that each identity is resourceful for adolescents. A final example of a study in which generalizability was not found can be found in the literature review by *Dimitrova, Özdemir, Farcas, Kosic, Mastrotheodoros, Michalek, and Stefenel*. The chapter provides an overview of studies of the so-called immigrant paradox among immigrants in Europe. The paradox, supported in studies conducted in the US, holds that first-generation immigrant

children show better adaptation than second-generation children. The alternative model, called migration morbidity, predicts the opposite pattern of gradual adjustment to the new culture across generations. Reviewing a total of 102 studies conducted in 14 European countries, some studies were found to corroborate the immigrant paradox, some studies to corroborate neither model (these studies did not find any generation differences), but most studies to confirm the migration morbidity model. All in all, the results describe a nuanced picture, with most evidence favoring migration morbidity. It is important to recognize the status of studies not replicating Western findings. Such studies do not invalidate Western findings but they extend these models by suggesting that Western findings are moderated by contextual factors.

Another interesting feature of the PYD studies reported in this volume is their sensitivity to design and analysis issues in cross-cultural research. *Dimitrova and Dominguez Espinosa* studied Saroglou's (2011) religiousness model which posits a four-factorial structure: believing (beliefs relative to external transcendence), bonding (rituals and emotions), behaving (adherence to norms) and belonging (social group cohesion) and their relation to life satisfaction. The model was tested in Mexico and Nicaragua. The link between these factors and well-being was also examined. Support was found for the identity (invariance) of the four factors, using structural equation modeling. Moreover, the link with well-being was comparable across the countries. *Neto and Dimitrova* tested the measurement invariance of a scale to measure satisfaction with love life among emerging adults in Angola, Brazil, East Timor, Macao, and Portugal. With the exception of a few items, the scale yielded comparable sales across the countries. The relevance of these studies for the field of PYD is not just related to their empirical findings, but also to the importance of testing such invariance cross-cultural context.

A final strength of PYD studies, and according to many their hallmark, is the attention for positive features of development, setting them apart from the deficiency-based approaches of mainstream psychology. I discuss here two examples from the present volume that illustrate these positive aspects. *Bobowik, Basabe, and Wlodarczyk* studied emerging adults in Spain. Most of the participants were immigrants, while a small group comprised host nationals. They studied the link between mainly positive background variables, such as host and co-ethnic support networks, and social well-being. One of the interesting findings is that young Romanian females reported higher social contribution compared to young host national females. In general, social well-being of immigrants and hosts was comparable. *Stanciu* makes a plea for contextually bound well-being of immigrants. He argues that life satisfaction pertains to their overall well-being and psychological adaptation pertains to their contextually-bound well-being. This contextually-bound well-being is influenced by, among other things, cultural distance and influences, in turn, general well-being. The focus on positive aspects of migration that characterizes the two examples described can be found in many chapters in this volume.

Weaknesses

In my reading, the PYD in its current is mainly based on psychological concepts and lacks tried-and-tested models of relevant features in the environment as well as models of interactions between individual and contextual characteristics. Historically, it is easy to understand that a movement that originates in psychology is dominated by psychological concepts and models. Still, it is strength of PYD that an attempt is made to study development in context. There are various attempts to model interactions, but these seem to be largely restricted to the drawing table and we have not yet reached the stage where these are tested. This problem is also illustrated in some chapters of the current volume, where authors argue that it is interesting to study a well-documented Western phenomenon in a very different cultural context. However, what is often lacking is a clear rationale why the phenomenon could (not) be expected to occur in the new context. We need to go beyond the lip service paid to the idea that context matters. We need to specify how it matters, when it matters, and when we can safely ignore contextual moderators.

This problem of poorly developed models of interactions between the individuals and their context is not unique for PYD and also troubles cross-cultural cross-cultural (Van de Vijver, 2006). Still, in cross-cultural psychology there is more work on the question of classifying cultures. Various taxonomies of cross-cultural differences have been used and successfully tested, such as economic and religious factors (Georgas, Van de Vijver, & Berry, 2004) and value patterns (Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 2012). The dichotomy between individualism and collectivism has been frequently employed and is also mentioned several times in this volume. The dichotomy has been criticized by various authors (e.g., Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Poortinga, 2015). In the context of both PYD and cross-cultural psychology, the main limitation of the dichotomy is its overstretched usage: individualism—collectivism has become a container concept that lacks a clear definition and is used to explain all East—West differences. The value of the individualism—collectivism dimensions should be evaluated against the backdrop that there are umpteen differences between Eastern and Western cultures and there is no evidence and it is indeed highly unlikely that all these differences can be reduced to the individualism—collectivism dichotomy. Still, the overstretched usage should not detract the attention from the underlying importance of using cultural dimensions to explain cross-cultural differences in psychological functioning.

Frameworks have been developed to understand differences in multicultural societies, such as intergroup relations and how immigrants deal with dominant cultures. The best known examples are the MIPEX (Migrant Integration Policy Index; Huddlestone & Niessen, 2011) and the MCP (Multiculturalism Policy Index; Banting & Kymlicka, 2006). Although the indexes of multicultural policies do not yield identical pictures for all countries (Helbling, 2013), they have been successfully used in various studies. Thus, Arikan, Van de Vijver, and Yagmur (2017) were interested in reading and math performance of host national and Turkish immigrant adolescents of 15 years of age in PISA, the Programme of International Student

Assessment, a large-scale study of educational achievement. They analyzed the reading and math outcomes of Turkish immigrants in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland and compared them with host nationals. MIPEX and the Human Development Index (an index of economic prosperity, education, and life expectancy) were used as indicators at country level. It was found that both the MIPEX and Human development Index scores of participating countries could predict differences in reading results but not in mathematics.

Opportunities

The main opportunity of PYD is its further conceptual and methodological expansion, including themes such as developing interaction models of youth and their environment (as described in the previous section), developing culture-informed approaches to youth development and relevant concepts in PYD (such as the question of whether a single model of well-being suffices in a cross-cultural context), combining emic and etic approaches, identifying culture-specific aspects of PYD, identifying cross-cultural patterns of and showing ways how to overcome limitations of western models of youth development. I describe examples from various chapters.

There is a growing recognition of the role of religion in development. From a PYD perspective, the role of religion is poorly understood, yet very relevant. Religious identity can be an important resource for youth, including immigrant youth. *Inguglia, Musso, Iannello, and Lo Coco* study religious commitment among middle and late adolescents and emerging adults in Italy, a country with a strong Roman Catholic tradition. A path model was tested in which religious commitment, measured by items such as "My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life", and optimism predicted life satisfaction. In each age group there was a positive, significant link between religious commitment and life satisfaction. The psychological mechanisms behind the link would require further study; for example, does religion create a sense of belonging for Italian youth (Saroglou's belonging role of religion), a normative framework that can help to make important life choices (behaving role), or something else?

An interesting challenge of current PYD models is mentioned in the chapter by *Chen, Li, and Chen*. These authors review PYD in China. They center the review on the five Cs model, referring to competence (adaptation in domain-specific areas), confidence (overall positive self-perception), character (respect for societal and cultural rules), caring (sense of social concern and empathy for others), and connection (positive relationships with people and institutions) (Lerner et al., 2005). The authors review evidence for the link of each of the five Cs with positive developmental outcomes, which suggests the generalizability of the relevance of the five Cs in China and of the positive links with outcomes in a Chinese context. The authors do not stop with this straightforward argumentation in favor of the generalizability of the 5C model. They see two issues in this generalizability. The first is that the 5C

model may be "underinclusive" and that in China more than five core constructs may be needed to describe PYD. Evidence is presented that ten constructs may be needed to describe positive developmental constructs in China: active and optimistic view, striving and insistence, leadership, caring, confidence, autonomy, prudence, love of learning, flexibility and innovation, and interests, and curiosity. More work needs to be done whether these ten constructs are needed and found. The relevance of this discussion is well illustrated in the literature on the Big Five model of personality in which it is maintained that neuroticism, extroversion, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness provide a universally applicable description of personality (e.g., McCrae & Allik, 2002). Cross-cultural emic studies have shown that the Big Five may be "underinclusive" and may need to be expanded to accommodate social aspects of personality such as relationship harmony (Cheung, Cheung, & Fan, 2013; Fetvadjiev, Meiring, Van de Vijver, Nel, & Hill, 2015; Katigbak, Church, Guanzon-Lapeña, Carlota, & Del Pilar, 2002). The second issue refers to the identity of meaning of the latent constructs. It is not clear whether current instruments to assess PYD can be used in China or whether items would need to be adapted (with possible changes in the meaning of latent constructs).

Somewhat related challenges are described in the chapter on PYD in Japan by *Sugimura, Hatano, and Mizokami*. From the perspective of a contextualized PYD, these authors raise the important issue of the need to develop local definitions (and measures) of well-being. A Western conceptualization of life satisfaction as the affective evaluation of one's own life may not be universally applicable. This Western conceptualization has indeed come under scrutiny. It has been argued that life satisfaction should also involve the well-being of the ingroup (e.g., my well-being is linked to and dependent on the well-being of my family members) (Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004). In addition, it has been argued that East Asia has a long tradition of so-called minimalist well-being conceptualizations, which refer to experiences of "nothingness", gratitude, peaceful disengagement, and being happy with the immediate "here and now" (Kan, Karasawa, & Kitayama, 2009). Western instruments do not address all these issues, which makes them vulnerable to "underinclusiveness". Sugimura and colleagues develop a similar argument about current conceptualizations of identity. The Western-based definitions of identity as agency based need to be complemented by models that acknowledge the value of being less proactive and "going with the flow", which can be very adaptive in a Japanese context. Like in the chapter on PYD in China, it is argued that to facilitate the appropriateness for Japan, our models and measures need to be adapted to the local context.

Lansford et al. report on a longitudinal study of mothers, fathers, and adolescents in nine countries (China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and United States). The chapter provides an overview of the main issues that had to be addressed in this ambitious study, such as combining emic and etic approaches, operationalizing culture, handling measurement invariance, and making translations/adaptations. The chapter is a must-read for anyone preparing cross-cultural PYD studies as it describes many relevant conceptual and methodological issues. Another strong feature of the chapter is its balanced view on cross-cultural

differences: the study combined etic and emic approaches, thereby dealing with similarities and differences across countries and clearly describing the huge opportunities of such studies. The chapter clearly describes the opportunities of PYD in large-scale studies.

Threats

In my view, there are two threats that can but do not need to materialize. The first is the Western dominance of the PYD field. Complaints about Western bias in psychology have been expressed by multiple authors (e.g., Arnett, 2008; Kagitçibasi, 2005; Van de Vijver, 2013). PYD is not foreign to this problem either. Contextualized approaches in psychology critically depend on input from many parts of the world. International cooperation with colleagues from currently underresearched parts of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, is badly needed. The present volume is a good illustration of this inclusiveness as authors represent many parts of the world. Since the start in the 1960s, there is an almost uninterrupted growth of cross-cultural studies in psychology, both in terms of the absolute number of publications and the relative contribution to the field of psychology (as measured by cross-cultural studies in PsycINFO). Hopefully, PYD can profit from and contribute to this development.

Another threat is the danger of one-sidedness. PYD started in many ways as a reaction to a one-sided focus on negative aspects in developmental studies. It is important that we come to realize that as an example, migration is more than stress and homesickness, that most migration ends with successful adaptation to the new context, and that many migrants have extensive social support networks of co-ethnics and host nationals. So, a focus on "bad news" is one-sided. Still, it is important that not all youth are resilient, that many refugees have post-traumatic stress disorder, and many migrants experience stress and discrimination. So, it is important that we strike a balance in PYD and do not neglect relevant negative conditions and outcomes.

Conclusion

The book provides a rich overview of PYD studies. This volume shows that PYD is in a healthy sate and that much has been achieved in the last decade. It is also reassuring to see the prominence of contextualization of the field of PYD. On the other hand, it is also clear that the progress in our conceptualization of the context and the interaction between youths and their contexts has not been formidable. So, we could call the glass half full, but also half empty. The long-term viability of offshoots of mainstream psychology like PYD is influenced by many factors; an important one is the extent to which a field can provide insights that advance the mainstream. It is

expected that PYD has the potential to enrich mainstream psychology (and developmental science) with such insights.

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