



Doing for others: Youth's contributing behaviors and psychological engagement in youth-adult partnerships



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ABSTRACT

Youth contributions to others (e.g., volunteering) have been connected to indicators of successful development, including self-esteem, optimism, social support, and identity development. Youth-adult partnerships, which involve youth and adults working together towards a shared goal in activity settings, such as youth-serving agencies or recreation organizations, provide a unique opportunity for examining youth contributions. We examined associations between measures of youth's participation in youth-adult partnerships (psychological engagement and degree of partnering) in activity settings and youth contributing behaviors, in two Canadian samples: (a) community-involved youth ($N = 153$, mean age = 17.1 years, 65% female) and (b) undergraduates ($N = 128$, mean age = 20.1 years, 92.2% female). We found that degree of partnering and psychological engagement were related to each other yet independently predicted contributing behaviors. Our findings suggest that youth-adult partnerships might be one potentially rich context for the promotion of youth's contributions to others.

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In North American society, youth are often considered self-absorbed and self-focused (Arnett, 2013), despite research findings that youth commonly contribute both to their families and communities (Sinha, 2015; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). Further, such contributions have been connected to indicators of successful development, including self-esteem, optimism, social support, and positive identity (e.g., Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007). Thus, this underestimation of youth's contributions to other individuals and society, as well as the relatively recent and limited nature of research on their contributions (Hershberg, DeSouza, Warren, Lerner, & Lerner, 2014; Hershberg, Johnson, DeSouza, Hunter, & Zaff, 2015), indicate the need for further research, both to gain a better understanding of youth contributions and promote these contributions.

The importance of participating and feeling engaged in structured activities (e.g., volunteering) for youth development has been well documented. Recently, researchers (e.g., Adachi & Willoughby, 2014) have highlighted psychological engagement, generally defined as youth's subjective involvement in activities, as being particularly important, over and above mere physical presence. Youth who are psychologically engaged in activities enjoy a number of benefits, including identity

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development, better quality friendships, and more positive self-concept (see review by Rose-Krasnor & Ramey, *in press*). Researchers have proposed a variety of specific aspects of activity contexts as explanations for these benefits. For example, the presence of positive adult role models, feelings of safety, and active influence in decision making have been found to be predictors of successful development (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lawford, Ramey, Rose-Krasnor, & Proctor, 2012). In the current study, we focus on two aspects of activity contexts that may have unique associations with youth contributions: participation in youth-adult partnerships and psychological engagement in the activity.

Youth-adult partnerships involve youth and adults working together toward a shared goal in contexts such as youth-serving organizations or recreation settings (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). These partnerships include elements, such as authentic decision making by youth and reciprocity, that distinguish them from other youth-adult relationships. Youth involved in youth-adult partnerships (i.e., youth partners) may have roles as members of advisory teams or boards of directors, in program planning and delivery, in advocacy, or may be involved in a range of other ways (Zeldin et al., 2013). Youth report being motivated to help and contribute to others (McLellan & Youniss, 2003; Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2015; Ramey, Lawford, & Rose-Krasnor, 2016) and these partnerships can be considered to be a unique sociocultural context, where youth can take on roles otherwise reserved for adults (Zeldin et al., 2013). Indeed, these partnerships may provide a unique opportunity for examining youth contributions.

In the current study, we examined associations between measures of youth's degree of participation in partnerships, psychological engagement in activities, and contributing behaviors among youth involved in youth-adult partnerships in activity settings. We expected that greater degrees of partnering (e.g., greater youth voice) and psychological engagement (e.g., more interest in the activity, sense of activity importance) would be linked with more positive adjustment (e.g., Krauss et al., 2014).

1. Contributing behaviors in youth

Research on youth contributions often has focused either on youth's beliefs, values, or intentions about contributing to others, such as youth's overarching values regarding contributions to others, or on youth's involvement in formal volunteer opportunities (Hershberg et al., 2015). Although youth's values and beliefs regarding their contributions are important factors in positive youth development, they do not necessarily coincide with their behaviors (Hershberg et al., 2014). Moreover, a narrow focus on participation in formal and organized opportunities overlooks many other contributing behaviors, such as help and support that youth provide in response to bids from others and as the need arises (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). Thus, there is a need to examine youth's contributing behaviors with a broad lens, which includes both helping behaviors (e.g., assisting others in youth's school or community), as well as more passive responses to requests for assistance (e.g., providing transportation to a friend in need).

These contributing behaviors reflect and can be examined by a number of theoretical and developmental perspectives (e.g., Fuligni & Telzer, 2013; Mayseless, 2016; Pancer et al., 2007). We outline some of these perspectives below.

In the positive youth development literature, contribution has been described as the sixth C of positive youth development. The five Cs of competence, caring, social connections, character, and confidence are theorized to develop first, enabling the youth to make meaningful contributions to others and the broader world (Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). In this framework, contribution is indicated by both youth's beliefs and values, such as their sense of moral or civic duty, and youth behaviors (Hershberg et al., 2015; Lerner et al., 2005). Hershberg et al. (2014, 2015) have suggested that youth-adult partnerships might be especially beneficial for the development of youth contribution, as horizontal youth-adult relationships and opportunities for youth leadership could be expected to foster youth's commitments to contribute and participate positively in society.

An additional perspective on contributing is offered by Rogoff and colleagues (Coppens et al., 2014; Rogoff, 2014), who have described children and youth's contributions to their community and family in behaviors such as helping in household and collaborative work. They conceptualized these activities as a form of informal learning and described it as "Learning by Observing and Pitching In". This process appears to foster initiative, perspective-taking, and self-regulation (Coppens et al., 2014; Rogoff, 2014). Although particularly common in indigenous communities within and outside of North America, Coppens et al. (2014) have described the need for more research on the potential of this process broadly across a diversity of communities, in order to better understand and foster young people's contributions.

Prosocial behaviors, such as providing unpaid child care or helping people who are sick, have been defined as voluntary actions intended to benefit others (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014). Such actions also can be considered a form of contributing behaviors. Different types of prosocial behavior appear to have different trajectories through adolescence and emerging adulthood and this diversity needs to be recognized in order to identify a coherent pattern of findings among different types, their predictors, and correlates (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014). Moreover, helping activities in adolescence and emerging adulthood, as well as the specific settings and predictors of these behaviors, have been highlighted by researchers as an area of prosociality in need of further research from a developmental perspective ((Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014).

In summary, for the purpose of this paper, we have defined contributing behaviors as doing for others, in structured and unstructured contexts. Contributing behaviors include both responding to bids for help and more actively seeking or initiating helping behaviors. Hershberg et al. (2014) and Pancer et al. (2007) have suggested that youth contributing behaviors might be

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