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The positivity imperative: a critical look at the ‘new’ youth development movement

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The field of youth development, long given over to discussions of youth as a time of storm and stress, raging hormones and problem behavior, has increasingly turned to look at the ‘sunny side’ of youth – at their agency, insights, capabilities and contributions. Youth, we are now regularly told, are not problems but resources and assets. In this paper, we look critically at the new, positive youth development movement and argue that, although having many continuities with ‘old’ models of youth development, it should nevertheless be seen as a shift in dominant conceptualizations of youth that has been driven in large part by neoliberal ideology and human capital theory. In order to analyze and understand intellectual, cultural and social phenomena such as the recent positive youth development movement, we need to recognize that youth as a social category has long been double-sided. It is not just negative stereotypes of youth that need to be critically interrogated, but positive stereotypes as well.

Keywords: extended adulthood; neoliberalism; positive youth development; youth and spirituality; youth as a social category

Introduction

Starting in the late 1980s and becoming dominant by the turn of the twenty-first century, an allegedly new ‘youth development movement’ arose that claimed to revolutionize the last hundred years of youth development theory, research and policy. This American-led global shift in youth work and adolescent study has tended to see itself explicitly as a movement and as being self-consciously new, inherently progressive, liberating, modern, righteous and just. It claims to utilize the latest advances in scientific knowledge and theory of what is required for healthy and normal youth development to shape not just youth and educational policy and programming, but a broad spectrum of social and economic policy and programming that impact individuals of all ages and life stages. The main shift in this new movement is said to be a turn from a century of pathologizing youth and approaching youth in a negative light, to a path-breaking sense of positivity and a new-found commitment to embracing and empowering the young.

Despite its centrality and global reach, this ‘positive’ youth development movement has received, with few exceptions (e.g. Ginwright and Cammarota 2002, Coussée *et al.* 2009), limited critical attention in the youth studies literature. In this

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paper, we draw together some of these previous critiques to present a comprehensive account of the broader historical and structural context and significance of positive youth development as an intellectual, cultural and social movement. Although positive youth development now truly has a global reach and may be found on all continents (e.g. Schulman and Davies 2007, Silbereisen and Lerner 2007, ARCCADE 2010), we focus on positive youth development primarily in the context of the United States. We do so because positive youth development originated in the United States and has been exported around the world by US institutions and individuals, and we believe that it is important for an international audience to have a better understanding of the particular nature of this movement's initial provenance.

In the following pages, we identify the key players, concepts and contexts of the positive youth development movement in the United States. We argue that, although positive youth development is, in many ways, a continuation of the practices and theories typical of 'old' youth development, it should not be seen solely as a repackaging of old ideas in new rhetoric. Positive youth development represents, in part, a shift in how youth is conceptualized that has been driven by neoliberal ideology and human capital theory; it has involved a strategic extension of the social category of youth in terms of the age range, social groups and arenas of practice that youth is commonly understood to cover; and it also has sought to inject a strong spiritual and religious dimension into mainstream youth work, research and theory. In the conclusion of this paper, we consider the significance of the call to 'be positive' about youth in contemporary society in youth studies more generally.

The rise of positive youth development

According to its proponents, the field of positive youth development found its starting point with the publication of two foundation-sponsored reports in the late 1980s in the United States: the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's (1989) *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* and the William T. Grant Foundation's (1988b) *The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Young Families* (Pittman *et al.* 2000, Fisher *et al.* 2005, Benson *et al.* 2006). These reports were followed by a decade of what proponents describe as the coming together of a broad and 'rare consensus' around both the importance of youth in society and the embrace of particular ways of conceptualizing and working with youth (Quinn 1999, p. 96, see also Takashi 1993). Indeed, the field brings together a wide array of densely networked actors, including many of the long-established liberal foundations; newer, corporate-sponsored neoliberal foundations and thinktanks; Christian and other faith-based organizations; government departments and policymakers; academic researchers; and youth practitioners. The list of foundations alone directly involved in the movement is extensive, and includes not just Carnegie and Grant, but also Annie E. Casey, Ford, Irvine, Kauffman, Kellogg, Lilly, MacArthur, Mott, the Open Society, Rockefeller, Surdna, Templeton and Tides, among others. According to its proponents' own self-history, the coming of age of this new field was marked by the gathering of five living US presidents for the President's Summit on Youth in Philadelphia in April 1997, and the formation at that event of America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth, led by former US General Colin Powell (Pittman *et al.* 2000, Benson *et al.* 2006).

Proponents of positive youth development identify themselves as a revolutionary movement in youth work and theory. According to Benson *et al.* (2006, pp. 894, 895), positive youth development has ‘unleashed a wave of energy and action not unlike that of a social movement.’ Damon and Gregory (2003) likewise claim that the ‘field of youth development has encountered nothing less than a sea change in a remarkably short period of time. . . . It has been a quiet revolution, with relatively little fanfare or combat’ (see also Dubas *et al.* 2003, Lerner and Steinberg 2004, McLaughlin *et al.* 2009). The essence of this shift has been the move from negativity to positivity in representations of the young. In introducing the inaugural issue of the *New Directions for Youth Development* journal in 2002, for example, editor Gil Noam wrote that:

We have for too long viewed adolescence as a time of crisis and danger, and we need to understand the positive and productive aspects of this important time in life. This journal is dedicated to this shift in thinking. It is unique, created for an amazingly innovative time and an emerging field. (quoted in McLaughlin *et al.* 2009)

The shift to positivity has proven to be extraordinarily productive. As the field’s self-historians point out, during the last two decades of the twentieth century there was a dramatic increase in the ‘number of scholars doing research on adolescence,’ the ‘numbers of journal articles, new journals, and edited volumes on adolescence,’ and the formation of new professional societies in North America and Europe dedicated to the scientific study of adolescent development (Dubas *et al.* 2003, p. 387, see also Lerner and Steinberg 2004). According to proponents, this proliferation of work represented the bringing together of ideas drawn from a wide range of subfields of the human sciences, including evolutionary biology, comparative psychology, bioecological developmental psychology, community psychology, developmental epidemiology, life-course sociology, developmental systems theory and so forth (Lerner *et al.* 2005, p. 11).

Though the rapid expansion of scientific activity around the study of youth and adolescence in recent years is undeniable, what precisely the scientific knowledge being produced at the center of this enterprise is all about has not always been clear. Youth development as a field sits at the interstices of public policy, youth programming practice and academic theory and research, and is as often driven by the former as the latter. The concept of youth development itself, furthermore, is widely acknowledged to be both poorly defined and difficult to define (Delgado 2002, p. 7). In general, though, positive youth development as a field of research and practice has been constituted as a series of attempts to identify the core competencies and characteristics that youth need to have to develop into healthy and ‘thriving’ adults in a ‘free’ and ‘productive’ society and economy; as well as the key factors and conditions that need to be created in order for such healthy development to occur. A key premise is that once these competencies have been identified and conditions created, all youth are capable of healthy or positive development. Thus, Richard Lerner and his colleagues have put forward a widely embraced model of the ‘Five Cs’ that all ‘prepared’ and ‘productive’ youth need to acquire: these are competence, character, confidence, connection and caring (Lerner 2004). Peter Benson and his colleagues at the Search Institute, meanwhile, have identified 40 internal and external ‘developmental assets’ that need to be acquired by and provided for all healthy youth

(Benson 1997, Scales and Leffert 1999). Colin Powell and America's Promise – the Alliance for Youth identified 'five promises' that were necessary for positive youth development – caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, marketable skills and community service opportunities – and aimed to use these promises 'to mobilize people from every sector of American life to build the character and competence of our nation's youth' (America's Promise Alliance 2007, p. 5). There are other lists as well: for the National Research Council (2002) in the United States, there are 28 'personal and social assets that facilitate positive youth development;' while Richard Catalano and his colleagues find that there are just 15 core 'constructs' of positive youth development (Catalano *et al.* 2004). Academic journals in the field regularly publish reports of studies testing which of these various lists of competencies best captures the process of positive youth development, and which interventions and programs most successfully foster these desired sets of characteristics among the young.

Youth development gets a makeover: old wine in new bottles

Despite rhetoric about sea changes and paradigm shifts, the 'new' youth development movement, as some critics have pointed out previously, often seems much the same as the 'old' youth development model. The 1989 Carnegie *Turning Points* report that supposedly launched a new era of positivity in representations of youth claimed that one-quarter of American youth were at high risk, and one-half at high or moderate risk of reaching adulthood unable to meet the requirements of the workplace, family responsibilities or participation in a democratic society. As Lesko (2001, p. 106) observes, although *Turning Points* 'offers glimpses of the potentials and strengths of young people, [it] dwell[s] on the deficiencies.' Males (1996, p. 30) argues similarly that 'the Carnegie report's only positive notation is that teenagers are not really unstable, rebellious, or irrational, which is the youth-science equivalent of finding that blacks aren't really disposed to steal watermelons.' The preoccupation with youth-at-risk continues in the field of positive youth development to the present day. The Forum for Youth Investment, for example, one of the leading organizations promoting positive youth development for over a decade, launched a 'Ready By 21' nationwide campaign in the United States in 2008, on the premise that 6 out of 10 youth in the country are not well prepared for college, work or life when entering their 20s (Pittman and Klein 2007).

When reading positive youth development texts, one often gets the sense that the language of critique of traditional youth development theory has been incorporated as a matter of relative emphasis, without changing the core substance. While dominant models of youth development in the twentieth century were criticized for pathologizing youth and for failing to consider social, cultural, political and economic contexts, the new and positive youth development theory emphasizes the strength and resilience of youth and claims to focus on the contexts and conditions of adolescent development through embracing an 'ecological' or 'developmental systems' frame. Positive views of youth, however, as Kelly (2006, p. 18) points out, are simply the flipside of negative views of youth: whether the one or the other is emphasized, each serves equally well to signal a particular set of institutional and ideological expectations 'about whom we should, as adults, become.' Coussée *et al.* (2009, p. 425) thus argue that 'the underlying assumptions of this seemingly positive

and preventative paradigm indicate and reaffirm a view of the development of vulnerable youth as lacking, deviant and pathological.' Positive youth development, they warn, is a 'tricky snake in the grass' (p. 425). Despite its emphasis on needing to pay attention to developmental contexts, positive youth development's notion of context tends to be strongly circumscribed. Proponents tend to write, for example, as if the concepts of 'competence,' 'character,' 'caring,' 'prepared' and 'productive' adulthood and so on, were self-evident, unproblematic and easily measurable terms, rather than being controversial and politicized social and cultural constructs. 'Character,' according to one typical explanation, is that which 'makes a person intend to do what is just, right, and good' (Hamilton *et al.* 2004, p. 3). Such a formulation conveniently sidesteps acknowledgement that it is precisely differences of opinion about 'what is just, right, and good' that are at the heart of all social, cultural and political conflicts – conflicts that inevitably shape the well-being and 'development' of youth, children and adults alike.

Some critics have argued that positive youth development is linked to a new genre of youth programs and practices that are 'Taylorized, output-focused and outcome-based' (Coussée *et al.* 2009, p. 423). But ties between rhetoric and practice in the field are loose, and positive youth development can refer as often to the work of youth organizations that have been around for decades (e.g. 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Big Brothers, YWCA, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, etc.) as to newer youth institutions and initiatives (Catalano *et al.* 2004, Seligman *et al.* 2005, Lerner 2009). In many respects, it is the overall gestalt of what positive youth development represents that matters far more than its specific empirical claims or practices. Through providing a vague and generically defined but positive language of youth that everyone can feel good about and appearing to accommodate long-standing critiques of youth development theory, positive youth development works to reassert the relevance of the youth development framework as the most important model for thinking about and working with that ever expanding segment of our population that we have collectively come to define as youth.

Youth development for a neoliberal society

It is not just the case, however, that the 'new' youth development movement conceals a core of deficit thinking about youth beneath its shiny, positive, progressive, refurbished exterior. There is also a strong and genuine positive view of youth that drives practice and thinking in this field. Positive youth development is saturated with the language of human capital: youth are constantly referred to as 'assets' and 'resources.' The notion that youth are 'resources to be developed rather than... problems to be managed' has become one of the mantras of the field (Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2003, p. 94). This 'youth-as-asset' frame, moreover, is promoted in direct contrast to traditional deficit models of youth. One of the core arguments of the Grant Foundation's 1988 *The Forgotten Half* was that the long-standing view, influenced by Erik Erikson's (1968) theory of adolescent development, of adolescence as a 'moratorium period,' in which youth needed freedom to withdraw from social commitments and responsibilities in order to explore and form their adult identities was flawed and had negative social and economic consequences.

The Forgotten Half focused on the post-compulsory education experiences of 'non-college bound' youth in the United States, many of whom spend years drifting

in and out of employment and cycling from one temporary, low skill, low pay job to another. Traditionally, this phenomenon had been attributed to the immaturity of youth: because youth in their late teens and early 20s are focused primarily on their personal and social lives, they are unwilling and unable to make much of a commitment to work, and thus take on jobs that demand little from them (Osterman 1980). Since it was believed that such 'immaturity' was shaped by the 'deeper foundation' of adolescent psychology, there was little that employers or policymakers could do (Osterman 1980, p. 150). *The Forgotten Half* (1988b), along with other reports at the time, turned such arguments on their head: youth are *not* inherently fragile or deviant or irresponsible; rather, when given the chance, youth make 'responsible,' 'resourceful' and 'resilient' workers (p. 4). The problem of youth today is that, first, widespread acceptance of deficit models of youth can 'become self-fulfilling prophecies' (William T. Grant Foundation 1988a, p. 9). Youth are resources, these reports argued, and as resources, they can be well-used or mis-used: if we don't expect much from our young, then we will not get much from our young in return (William T. Grant Foundation, p. 9; see also National Center on Education and the Economy 1990, p. 43). The second problem was that links between youth, schools and employers had become too weak and there was, therefore, an urgent need to build stronger ties between them. Far from needing to preserve a space for youth to develop that was sheltered from the adult world of work, the lives and learning experiences of youth should be harnessed ever more closely to the needs and interests of employers, the workplace, the market, and the economy at large. The promotion of the youth-as-asset frame, then, was closely tied to a larger neoliberal project of further vocationalizing education, promoting close business-education partnerships, and reshaping schools and other institutions working with youth along corporate, business and market lines (Tannock 2001, pp. 23-31).

A key part of the shift that has occurred with positive youth development has involved moving the image of youth from one of opposition or exclusion from mainstream society and corporate-led economy to one of whole-hearted inclusion. This is not entirely new. As Ewen (1976) argues, the celebration of youth has long been part of capitalism. The construction of the notion of the teenager in the 1950s is attributed by many to corporate marketing rhetoric (Palladino 1996). But the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s ushered in an intensified period of selling corporations to youth and youth to corporations – and individuals and institutions in the positive youth development movement were part of this process. The Kauffman Foundation, which brought together the Youth Development Directions Project in 1998 – described by Benson *et al.* (2006, p. 899) as 'one of the first efforts to capture the breadth and status of the field' of positive youth development – is dedicated to promoting entrepreneurship among youth, in order to realize its vision of creating 'a society of economically independent individuals' (Kauffman Foundation 2010). Kauffman president Carl Schramm has been called the 'evangelist of entrepreneurship,' someone who, even in the midst of the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, spoke against calls for government regulation and economic stimulus packages in favor of letting business take care of matters on its own (Riley 2009).

Similarly, the International Youth Foundation (IYF), which has been one of the most prominent proponents of positive youth development (two of its executives, Rick Little and Karen Pittman, helped to create the Forum for Youth Investment,

the President's Summit on Youth, and America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth), is essentially a global marketing organization for some of the world's largest and wealthiest corporations. According to the IYF, the foundation 'was created largely to help global companies . . . plan effective strategies for investing in children and youth' (Reese *et al.* 2002, p. 4). In 1997, the IYF adopted a growth strategy called the 'Irresistible Proposition,' in which it sought to 'become the "vehicle of choice" for donors' wanting to link their corporate image with the promotion of youth well-being (Reese *et al.* 2002, p. 14). The IYF argues that:

not only are children and youth a non-threatening and emotionally satisfying area of corporation and/or foundation engagement, but the turn of the millennium added to the global interest in 'doing something for the next generation.' From a corporate standpoint, it is difficult to think of a more attractive beneficiary population. Work on behalf of children and youth has a universal appeal that crosses political, religious, and ethnic lines. . . . IYF's emphasis on long-term youth development and its focus on the positive as opposed to the negative aspects of youth issues increases the organization's attractiveness to potential . . . partners. (Reese *et al.* 2002, pp. 19–20)

The IYF has partnered with USAID, the World Bank, and corporations such as Nike, Nokia, Cisco, Microsoft, Shell, GE, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, the Gap and so on to set up youth development programs all over the world that serve as 'an integral part of [each] company's brand and corporate identity' (Reese *et al.* 2002, p. 56).

The flipside of this corporate embrace of youth in the positive youth development movement is a subtle but sustained critique of welfare state support for families, youth and children. Part of the appeal of focusing on positive aspects of youth is that social problems can be more easily ignored. The difference between traditional deficit models of youth and the new positive outlook, according to Benson and Saito (2000, p. 126), is that the deficit model 'accents naming and reducing obstacles to positive human development (e.g. poverty, family violence, victimization, abuse, neglect, negative peer or adult influence),' whereas positive youth development 'moves in the direction of naming and promoting core positive developmental processes, opportunities and experiences.' In this model, in other words, there is no need to focus on unpleasant issues of poverty, unemployment, inequality, injustice, war or occupation and so on. As Ehrenreich (2010) observes more generally, in her critique of the promotion of 'positive thinking' in the United States, dwelling on such negative matters is now said to be part of the problem. Instead, individuals and communities are supposed to embrace positivity and take responsibility for helping themselves to get ahead and thrive. Traditional ways of talking about youth, warns Benson (2003, p. 25), have been warped by 'a culture dominated by deficit and risk thinking' that

fuels the creation of elaborate and expensive service and program delivery infrastructures, creates a dependence on professional experts, encourages an ethos of fear, and by consequence, derogates, ignores and interferes with the natural and inherent capacity of communities to be community.

As a field, positive youth development has both promoted and been influenced by scientific research and theory on resilience – that is, the study of the characteristics and conditions (resilience factors) that enable a minority of children and youth growing up in adverse circumstances to succeed where the majority do not (Damon

2004). Although resilience research, in and of itself, has no inherent or necessary political ideology, it can clearly be attractive to anyone wanting to shift attention away from structural inequalities and injustices to center attention on the responsibilities of individuals, families and local communities for enabling children and youth to get ahead on an individual basis (Seccombe 2002, Canavan 2008, Hoffman 2010). Furthermore, since welfare state entitlements for children and youth have been based on claims of their greater vulnerability and neediness, arguments that emphasize the positive strengths of youth can, whether intentionally or not, undermine such claims and entitlements. Positive youth development, according to Damon (2004, p. 16), represents a move away from the 'fragile child assumption' of earlier periods. Rather than see youth as delicate, vulnerable and in need of shelter and protection, Damon (2004, p. 15) argues for a return to a 'more traditional view that young people are capable of bearing life's burdens without breaking.'

These shifts in positive youth development are usefully viewed through a framework suggested by Robert Enright and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin–Madison more than two decades ago (Enright *et al.* 1987). In the 1980s, Enright and his co-investigators looked at how adolescence had been perceived in the field of developmental psychology over the preceding century. Focusing on articles published in a leading journal in the field over that time span, they found a close and consistent relationship between changes in social, political and economic conditions in the United States and shifts in accounts of adolescence made by American developmental psychologists. During periods of economic depression, Enright *et al.* report, 'theories of adolescence emerge that portray teenagers as immature, psychologically unstable, and in need of prolonged participation in the educational system' (p. 553). During periods of war, however, a different theory of adolescence prevails. At such times, 'the psychological competence of youth is emphasized, or else [it is claimed that] the extent and duration of participation in the educational system should not be as great as had been supposed' (p. 553). Enright *et al.* argue that shifts in scientific understanding and social regulation of youth broadly reflect changing labor power needs in American society and economy. Depending on historical context, political purpose and ideology, youth may be viewed alternatively as mature or immature, strong or weak, competent or incompetent, stable or unstable, a pivotal or unnecessary (and even problematic) component of a nation's fighting army or labor force. We suggest that the positive youth development movement represents another such shift, in which in a neoliberal society, the competence, strengths and maturity of youth are emphasized and celebrated, as grounds for pulling young people into the workforce, opening up the spheres of education and youth development to market forces and business interests, promoting the ideology of neoliberalism among the young and undermining the traditional entitlements of welfare state provision.

The extension of youth: from pre-adolescence to emerging adulthood

The new youth development movement has been marked not only by its emphasis on positivity and by an explosion of academic, programming and policymaking interest in youth: it has also contributed to a dramatic expansion of the social category of youth itself, both horizontally, in terms of the range of people and practices it encompasses, and vertically, in terms of the chronological age range to which it is

commonly understood to refer. The two founding reports of the movement each served to extend the age range of youth in different directions. The Carnegie *Turning Points* report shifted youth downward into childhood, to focus on 'pre-adolescence;' while the Grant Foundation's *The Forgotten Half* shifted youth upward into the working age population, such that individuals in their 20s and even 30s were discussed within the framework of youth development – a stage now known as 'late adolescence' or 'emerging adulthood' (Pittman *et al.* 2000, p. 19). Further, one of the effects of shifting from a deficit to asset model of youth is that talk about and programs for youth now encompass all individuals between childhood and adulthood, rather than being directed principally at a designated minority of 'deviant,' 'delinquent' or 'problem' youth (Witt 2002). Whereas in previous eras (and in certain contexts in the contemporary era) 'youth' frequently served as a euphemism to talk about poor, working class, black, Latino or other visible minority youth, today 'youth' just as often refers to pre-teens, teens, and individuals in their 20s or 30s from privileged, middle class and wealthy backgrounds.

The expansion of youth as a social category is commonly explained in the new youth development literature as a direct effect of social and economic change. Children are said to be growing up earlier as a result of the spread of mass media, corporate advertising and consumer society; while adulthood is said to be increasingly delayed for many due to the growing need for post-secondary education and training, the disappearance of stable, career employment, and the corresponding rise in the age of marriage, parenthood, financial independence and moving out of the familial home (Arnett 2000, 2007a). Youth, however, is never simply an effect of, but is also a tool and technology for managing social change. The expansion of youth as a social category, at least in part, is something that has been created and driven by the intellectual work of academics, practitioners and policymakers in the sway of particular social, cultural and political ideologies and agendas. Youth in contemporary society has become a favored and extraordinarily productive social category. In order to understand the broadening embrace of this category, we have to ask not just how are youth being talked about (i.e. in positive or negative terms), but also what is at stake in referring to individuals as youth in the first place.

We suggest there are two primary reasons why youth has become such a useful social category in the contemporary, neoliberal era. First, youth is a relational category that is defined in relation to and combines characteristics from childhood and adulthood. As James (1986, p. 155) notes, youth is a border category that is ambiguous, betwixt and between, 'neither child nor adult.' The work of Enright and his colleagues, discussed above, is useful in pointing out how the childlike or adultlike characteristics of youth may be variously emphasized in different social and historical contexts. But more than this, youth takes on differing significance depending on whether it is contrasted with childhood or adulthood. As the category of youth is extended downward into childhood, the adultlike characteristics of children are emphasized: rather than being seen as vulnerable members of the population in need of welfare state support and protection, for example, children as youth (pre-adolescents) can be seen as individually responsible for their own choices and actions, and ready and able to make their own way in the grown-up world of business, work and the capitalist market economy. Conversely, as the category of youth is extended upward into adulthood, the childlike characteristics of adults are emphasized: adults as youth (emerging adults) are constructed as immature, still in

development, not yet fully 'grown up,' and consequently, may be said to be less entitled to make claims on such things as a family wage job, career stability or the means to live independently. Indeed, the promotion of emerging adulthood as a normal stage of development, that is argued to be healthy for society and positively experienced by most individuals in their late teens and 20s (e.g. Arnett 2007a, 2007b), works directly to normalize the erosion of social and economic standards of living that has taken place for large segments of younger generations under conditions of neoliberal restructuring.

Second, the extension of the social category of youth typically involves promoting the youth development model as the most relevant analytic framework for talking and thinking about what is happening in the lives of individuals in the second and third decades of their lives, while backgrounding other analytic frames that focus on issues of class, race, nation, gender or the sweep of global social, political and economic transformation and conflict. Something shifts when we start thinking of a minimum wage worker in his or her 20s as a youth or emerging adult, rather than, for example, a member of the working class. In highlighting youth as the relevant social category, one's analytic lens tends to focus narrowly on issues of formal and informal education, training, learning and the acquisition of skills and competencies. Both the Carnegie and Grant reports in the late 1980s were concerned with the growing inequalities in the United States that were the result of the neoliberal restructuring of the Reagan era. But rather than contest such restructuring directly, the reports claimed that the struggles of youth (from poor and working class backgrounds, in particular) were caused by a mismatch between youth developmental needs and the organization of schooling in America. The solution, therefore, was to be found in education reform (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989, William T. Grant Foundation 1988a, 1988b). Although the new youth development movement claims to have shifted away from an individualist model of earlier periods to an ecological model that addresses the environmental contexts of youth development, these contexts almost never include broad social, economic and political issues and conflicts. Instead, they pertain to micro-contexts of school, family and local community (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002, Males 1996).

The frame of youth development also tends to depoliticize social analysis and action. Instead of addressing political and ideological conflict and difference directly, the positive youth development model offers a supposedly expert and scientific body of knowledge that provides a standardized and universal set of principles (the Five Cs or five promises, etc.) for what we need to do to facilitate healthy youth development. Previously, we have examined how the World Bank has used the discourse of positive youth development globally to promote what is in fact a standard menu of neoliberal social and economic policy prescriptions that go far beyond what is traditionally thought of as youth policy (Sukarieh and Tannock 2008). Another example of how differences in social and political agendas can be subsumed and obscured under a flattening youth development umbrella may be seen in the growing interest of US and international foundations in supporting youth leadership, participation, activism and organizing projects, which have grown exponentially in the wake of the positive youth development movement's rediscovery of the agency, contributions and capabilities of the young. While civic activism and social movement organizing have traditionally focused on transforming society, foundation support for youth activism shifts the focus to transforming individual

youth. Instead of addressing the concerns typically at the heart of analysis of civic activism – for example, the politics and ideologies of particular youth leadership, activism or organizing projects, the success or failure of these projects in changing social policy and practice, the links of such projects to broader social movements, or the question of whether the constitution of these projects as ‘youth projects’ was enabling or disabling for political action – evaluation tends to focus on how participation in such projects enables positive youth development to occur (see, for example, SPR 2003). Once the youth label is embraced, all else can fade into the background. Positive youth development – along with its associated set of concepts of youth participation, leadership, organizing and activism – can thus be easily deployed to present a façade of engagement with radical, oppositional, grassroots politics that in the end works toward little more than fostering a generic and benign set of designated youth skills, competencies and character traits.

Science and spirituality: youth development as a vehicle for desecularization

One of the less recognized aspects of the new youth development movement is its emphasis on religion and spirituality, and the close involvement of a coalition of faith-based individuals, groups and foundations. The movement has been supported by foundations dedicated to promoting religion and spirituality in contemporary society, most notably the Lilly Endowment and John Templeton Foundation. Many of its leading voices are also committed to the study and promotion of religion and spirituality. Peter Benson, for example, is president and CEO of the Search Institute, which was formerly known as Lutheran Youth Research and subsequently Church Youth Research, and continues to focus on the religious development of the young; the Search Institute receives funding from Lilly and Templeton, and has recently used this funding to set up the Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence, which Benson directs. Benson also sits on the Templeton Foundation board of directors and publishes with Templeton Press. William Damon, director of Stanford University’s Center on Adolescence, has received funding from the Templeton Foundation, publishes with the Templeton Press, and is on the Templeton Foundation’s advisory board; he even dedicated his book *The Moral Advantage* to the founder of the Templeton Foundation, Sir John Templeton. Damon is also an advisor to the Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence. Richard Lerner has likewise received funding from the Templeton Foundation for research on adolescent spiritual development, and is an advisor to the Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence.

In large part due to the efforts of these and other affiliated individuals, as well as the financial and institutional support of Lilly, Templeton and groups such as the Fuller Theological Seminary and the Life Cycle Institute at the Catholic University of America, ‘the past decade has seen an explosion of interest in spirituality within youth development and related fields’ (Benson *et al.* 2008, p. 2). Several academic journals in the field of adolescent development have devoted special issues to the topic of religion and spirituality; and in 2006, a *Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* was published. Articles now appear regularly in the adolescent development literature on topics such as: the role of spirituality and religious involvement in reducing youth risk behaviors and improving youth mental health and overall well-being; the role of faith-based groups in providing positive

youth development programs; the attitudes and practices of contemporary youth toward religion and spirituality; the stages and processes of spiritual development among the young; the most effective ways to support and promote spirituality and religious attachment among children and youth; and the best ways to develop effective youth ministries.

The emphasis on spirituality and religion in youth work and adolescent research is not new. Often described as the founder of the concept of adolescence at the beginning of the twentieth century, G. Stanley Hall borrowed from nineteenth century theological thought in developing his theories of adolescent development, and saw youth as a critical and intense period of faith and spiritual searching and sentiment (Kett 2003, Fass 2008). Faith-based organizations, such as the YMCA and YWCA, have likewise long been prominent as providers of youth services (Pugh 1999). But the resurgent interest in the contemporary era in spirituality and religion is distinguished by two features. First, the promotion of spirituality and religion in the positive youth development movement is not just about youth, but forms part of a larger project of desecularizing society, and in particular, the academy. One of the core characteristics of positive youth development as a movement, according to William Damon, Peter Benson and their colleagues, is that:

in its efforts to identify the positive attitudes and competencies that energize healthy developmental trajectories, [it] is not afraid to identify values, moral perspectives, and religious worldviews as constructive developmental resources even though this 'flies in the face of our predominantly secular social-science traditions.' (Benson *et al.* 2006, p. 895; see also Damon 2004, p. 21)

The editors of the *Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* complain of the 'marginalization' of spiritual matters in the social sciences and 'pervasive personal rejection of religion by social scientists,' and state that their 'long-term goal is to help position spiritual development as a central and mainstream issue in the social sciences' (Roehlkepartain *et al.* 2006, pp. 2–3). In the same volume, Benson (2006, p. 484) writes of wanting to bridge the supposedly 'irreconcilable split between science and religion' and erode 'the artificial distinction between faith and fact.' In this, Benson and other positive youth development proponents are in alignment with the Templeton Foundation's mission to 'bring scientific legitimacy to religion' and 'put religion on an equal intellectual footing with science' (Ehrenreich 2010, p. 166); as well as the efforts of the Lilly Endowment and other foundations (such as the Pew Charitable Trusts) to bring Christian, and often evangelical Christian, intellectual thought into the academic mainstream (Wolfe 2000, Hamilton and Yngvason 2002).

Second, although there is no inherent or necessary link between a concern with religion and spirituality in relation to youth development and an embrace of neoliberal, free market ideology, in practice in the positive youth development movement the promotion of spirituality and neoliberalism runs closely together. The proliferation of interest in individual faith and spirituality, and growth of fundamentalist forms of Christianity and other religions in the context of neoliberalism has been widely noted, and interpreted as a response to growing social isolation, insecurity and instability, the erosion of the welfare state and the collapse of socialist political alternatives on the one hand, and the privatization and

commodification of religion on the other (e.g. Tétreault and Denmark 2004, Carrette and King 2005, Moreton 2007, Connolly 2008). In the case of positive youth development, the emphasis on spirituality as a critical 'missing priority' in youth development promotes a turning inward, a further move away from analyzing the lives of the young in the context of transformations of global political economy; and the concern with spiritual *development* lends itself to a highly atomistic project of working on the self, a framework fully in line with the neoliberal ideology of individualistic entrepreneurialism (Kelly 2006). More than this, the same individuals, groups and foundations in the positive youth development movement that promote a focus on spiritual development very often also promote neoliberal forms of development as well. The Lilly Endowment, for example, provides support for a number of neoliberal thinktanks in North America (such as the American Enterprise Institute, Fraser Institute, Manhattan Institute and Pacific Research Institute), as well as the Institute for Liberty and Democracy in Peru, 'which offers free-market remedies for poverty' (Roelofs 2006). The Templeton Foundation, similarly, has provided grant support directly to Milton Friedman and a range of neoliberal organizations (such as the Manhattan Institute and Association of Private Enterprise Education), and avows its commitment to demonstrating 'the benefits of competition, specifically how free enterprise and other principles of capitalism can, and do, benefit the poor' (quoted in Ehrenreich 2010, p. 168).

Conclusion: youth and the positivity imperative

It is not just the new positive youth development movement that has promoted positive views of youth. The premise at the heart of youth studies throughout most of its history is that the core problem of youth has been that youth have been seen as a problem: youth in society are predominantly viewed through a negative lens (as a problem, pathology, threat, deficit, etc.) and the task for progressive, critical and radical youth practitioners, researchers and policymakers, therefore, is to promote an ostensibly more accurate and just positive view of youth instead. The introduction to a recent edited volume of essays on *Youth in Society* is typical:

Generally youth tends to be seen as a problem: young people are beset by predominantly negative images, are seen as either a source of trouble or in trouble. In bringing together this collection one of our main goals has been to challenge this problematising perspective on youth. (Roche *et al.* 2004, p. xiii)

In the more positive view of youth, the agency, contributions and capabilities of the young in society are to be recognized, celebrated and supported. The limitations of this analytic frame become apparent when both mainstream and critical approaches to youth are marked by an overt and deliberate positivity, which manifests itself in the endless generation of programs dedicated to empowering, engaging, including and celebrating youth. Today, it is not just leftists, feminists and anti-racists speaking out against the pathologization of the young, but individuals of every political and ideological stripe and color. In such a context, the standard criticisms of the youth development model commonly found in the youth studies literature – i.e. that it is wedded to a regressive and pathologizing 'storm and stress' view of adolescence (e.g.

Wyn and White 1997, Finn 2001, Lesko 2001) – are, at the very least, in need of some updating and revision.

More than this, however, the positive youth development movement both highlights and exploits a blind spot that has been endemic in the social science of youth: a failure to recognize adequately the broader nature of youth stereotyping in society. For youth as a social category has always been double-sided, encompassing both negative and positive characteristics and stereotypes. If there is one stereotype in which youth, simply by their very existence, are said to threaten the core fabric of society, there is a flipside, in which youth are promised to revolutionize society and cure it of its past ills and failures:

Youth are complex signifiers, simultaneously idealizations and monstrosities, pathologies and panaceas. Youth stands for many things at once: for the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospect of a future. . . . Youth as a sign of contradiction, as the figuration of mythic bipolarity, is enshrined in the foundations of the modern collective imaginary. . . . It is crucial . . . that we stress its [youth's] intrinsic bipolarity, its doubling. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006, pp. 269, 280)

To adopt terms used by Austin and Willard (1998, p. 2), youth have been widely constructed as ‘demons of culture’; but they have also long been promoted as ‘angels of history,’ viewed alternatively and/or simultaneously both ‘as a vicious, threatening sign of social decay and “our best hope for the future.”’ The mobilization of positive and negative images of youth is always linked to particular political projects and visions in the context of changing social and economic structures. In different eras and from differing political points of view, the Soviet Union’s Young Pioneers, the Hitler Youth of Nazi Germany and the United States’ Young Americans for Freedom have all been put forward as society’s worst nightmare and as harbingers of a brighter tomorrow.

Even G. Stanley Hall, now viewed by contemporary promoters of the positivity of youth as the outdated and misguided promoter of a deficit model of adolescence that dominated academic thought and social practice for almost 100 years, actually viewed youth in a double light. Though Hall thought of adolescence as a period of ‘storm and stress’ and ‘vulnerability,’ he also saw this life stage as a ‘powerful realm of energy and hope,’ in which the values he perceived to be missing from modern society could be found and/or created once again (Kett 2003, Fass 2008, p. 39). Hall’s 1904 book, *Adolescence*, ‘counterposed the purity and vigor of youth to the fragmented, deadening, and routinized qualities of urban industrial life’ (Cole 1992, p. 214). ‘There is really no clue by which we can thread our way through all the mazes of culture and the distractions of modern life save by knowing the true nature and needs of childhood and adolescence,’ wrote Hall, ‘Other oracles may grow dim, but this one will never fail’ (quoted in Cole 1992, p. 214).

Positive views of youth are as old as negative views of youth – and just as integral to dominant constructions of youth as a social category. Promoting youth, proclaiming their power, strength or virtue, or celebrating their innate creativity or revolutionary potential is not inherently any more progressive, critical or radical – or just or accurate – than is condemning youth, complaining about youth, disregarding youth or focusing on their shortcomings, problems and deficits. The challenge for critical analysis is not simply to replace negative stereotypes of youth with positive

ones (or vice versa). It is, rather, to understand how and why particular kinds of positive and negative stereotypes of youth – or, indeed, invocations of the youth label in the first place – are mobilized by different groups in changing social and economic contexts over time. In this way, the field of youth studies and organizing can follow similar movements in women's, ethnic and race studies and organizing, to go beyond simply inverting stereotypes to critically interrogating the material and social conditions of the construction of these broad categories of identity.

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