A Person-Centered Approach to Exploring the Role of Ecological Assets in Character Development

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Character Development

- There is renewed interest in the psychological study of character in positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), positive youth development (Lerner, 2004) and education (Heckman & Knutt, 2012).
- However, we lack understanding of what character is and how it develops (Berkowitz & Bier, 2014).

Development of Content and Structure

Dimensions that underlie character strengths have been proposed (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), yet factor analyses show divergent results across studies (McGrath, 2014).
- Character in childhood and early adolescence may have a global and undifferentiated structure. With age, character may become more complex and differentiated (Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2015).
- Some argue that certain lower-order strengths (e.g., kindness) begin developing early whereas higher-order strengths (e.g., purpose) develop later in life (Park & Peterson, 2006).
- Others argue that children of any age can display any given character strength depending on contextual supports (Brock, 2011; Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2015).

Ecological Assets and Character

Ecological assets are features of contexts that are associated with positive development in youth (Benson et al., 2006; Theokas & Lerner, 2006).
- Parental civic modeling may promote character strengths like teamwork, leadership, responsibility, and purpose (Peterson & Park, 2011).
- Civic communication by teachers and parents may promote respectfulness and cooperation (Turner & Berkowitz, 2005).
- Quantity and quality of organized activity involvement is considered ‘character building’ and supports various positive developmental outcomes (MacLeod, 2004; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009).
- Psychological needs support in families and classrooms facilitates intrinsic motivation and enhance the effectiveness of other socialization contexts for fostering positive competencies (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997).

Study Aims

- Document patterns of character strengths across elementary school, middle school, and high school using a person-oriented approach.
- Examine how profiles of ecological assets are associated with character profiles.
- Explore age differences in associations between ecological asset profiles and character profiles.

Discussion & Implications

Age Differences in Character

Character profiles were distinguished primarily by level differences across ages, although some age differences in differentiation were evident.
- Elementary School Age.
  - Elementary school age youth had the least within profile differentiation, suggesting character is more globalized for them.
  - The lower differentiation between strengths is consistent with a work on self-concepts; youth are able to intercoordinate their conceptions about their strengths but often display an all-or-nothing perception (Harter, 2015).
- Middle School Age.
  - Middle school age youth showed increased within profile differentiation.
  - The subtle level differences across profiles reflect the increasingly refined ways youth form self-concepts (Harter, 2015).

Ecological Assets and Character Profiles

- Our results aligned with a cumulative approach to assets (Benson et al., 2006), across all three age groups, more ecological assets were associated with character profiles marked by high character strengths.
- Pairing ecological assets with needs supportive climates may be especially important for character development, supporting self-determination theory (Grolnick et al., 1997).
- Yet, psychological needs support alone appears insufficient for optimizing character development.
- With age, organized activities become increasingly important for character development as shown by age differences in links between high quality and quantity of organized activities and character profiles. Thus, our findings suggest that organized activities may become more salient contexts for character development over time.

References

[References list]

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