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“I Used to Be Wild”: Adolescent Perspectives on the Influence of Family, Peers, School, and Neighborhood on Positive Behavioral Transition

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Abstract

Public health practice involving adolescents is largely focused on preventing or delaying the initiation of risk behavior. However, given the experimental and exploratory nature of this developmental period, this is often impractical. This paper focuses on behavioral transitions and the ways in which youth involved in risk behaviors shift to more promotive behaviors. Based on a positive youth development perspective, in-depth interviews with urban youth were conducted and analyzed to gain an understanding of the influences on behavior change. Specific family support, ability to detach from harmful peer relationships, and school connectedness and vocational support emerged as important to those youths who made a positive behavioral transition. These findings suggest the importance of understanding ways to support the cessation of involvement in risk behaviors and reinforce the significance of contextual influences on youth development.

Keywords

adolescence; risk behaviors; positive youth development; qualitative

While adolescence is typically a time of opportunities, physical strength and health, it can also be a very tenuous period, described by G. Stanley Hall (1904) as one of “storm and stress.” It is a time when death by accident or violence is much more likely than at any other period of life (CDC, 2010), and when habits formed and decisions made will alter the trajectory of the rest of one's life (Arnett, 1999). The creation of the positive youth development (PYD) perspective is one instance of this shift of attention from survival to thriving. The goals of PYD are multifaceted and include resilience, competence, identity development, future orientation, and prosocial behavior (Catalano et al., 2002). In short, it is a framework focusing on development and acquisition of proficiencies rather than prevention of problems. Previous researchers have proposed a set of forty indicators known as “developmental assets.” These developmental assets cluster around family, peers, school, and neighborhood, key aspects of an adolescent's socioecological context (Scales et al.,

2006). The present study looked at how potential assets in these contexts of development influence youths' tendency to make positive behavioral transitions.

Positive Behavioral Transition

The term "transition" in the context of adolescence usually refers to the transition into adulthood. For this paper we focus on behavioral transitions that occur when an individual involved in risk behaviors alters course and reduces or ends his or her involvement in these behaviors, allowing for involvement in promotive behaviors. We have chosen to call this "positive behavioral transition" rather than what some literature has termed "desistance" due to the qualitative nature of our study, as desistance is a more precise term and is usually used to describe cessation of criminal behavior, which our participants were not necessarily involved in. While it is understood that sensation-seeking, risk preference, and reward sensitivity (all associated with risk-taking behaviors) typically peak between ages of 13 and 16 before tapering off (Steinberg, 2008), and that the onset and timing of risk behaviors varies according to what support is available to the adolescent (Jessor, Collins, & Jessor, 1972), little is known about what causes an individual who is involved in risk behavior to make the necessary changes to cease involvement in these behaviors.

Studies of late adolescent desistance from antisocial (often criminal) behavior suggest that desistance might be related to psychosocial maturity measured in terms of impulse control, suppression of aggression, consideration of others, future orientation, personal responsibility, and resistance to peer influence (Monahan, Steinberg, Cauffman, & Mulvey, 2009; see also Mulvey et al., 2004). Another study conducted in the Netherlands suggested that social support and strong attachment to prosocial adults significantly predicts desistance from criminal behavior in adolescents (Lodewijks et al., 2010). A longitudinal study of less extreme antisocial behaviors did not find that teacher support influenced the cession of risk behavior, with the exception of violent behavior (McNeely & Falci 2004). Thus there is a need for additional work seeking to understand transition away from more normative risk behaviors as well as studies to explain the role of external developmental assets in these transitions, complementing the internal, psychological aspect described by Monahan and colleagues.

Developmental Assets

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development has helped public health researchers better understand and explain a variety of phenomena (Campbell et al., 2009, Gregson et al., 2001; Kim & Moen, 2002; Sallis et al., 2006), and is particularly relevant for understanding the health and behavior of youth who are profoundly influenced by their external environment. Researchers at Search Institute drew on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to develop a framework of developmental assets, core concepts that describe the healthy development of adolescents (see Scales et al., 2006). According to Scales, Benson, and colleagues, "Assets are defined as important relationships, skills, opportunities and values that help guide adolescents away from risk behaviours, foster resilience, and promote thriving" (Scales, et al., 2006, p. 693). The forty developmental assets are separated into two

groups, “external assets” and “internal assets.” For this paper we focused on family, peer, school, and neighborhood support.

Family

Although adolescence is a period marked by increasing independence from one's family, the presence of caring relationships within the family, and especially with a parent, is the best predictor of positive health and educational outcomes (Blum & Blum, 2009). In addition to connectedness, a term that refers to the protective relationships that exist between an individual and his or her environment (Bernat & Resnick, 2009), parental involvement and parenting style are strong predictors of adolescent behavior (Baumrind, 1991). For example, authoritative (i.e., high warmth, high control) parenting is associated with positive behavioral outcomes among youth, whereas permissive (i.e., high warmth, low control) and authoritarian (i.e., low warmth, high control) styles are not (Baumrind, 1971). It has also been shown that parental aspirations influence a child's academic success more than those of peers (Davies & Kandel, 1981), and that poor parental monitoring such as not tracking friends and whereabouts is associated with a range of deviant behavior (Ary et al., 2009).

Social capital, that is, power and influence derived from social connections (Portes, 2000), may also influence adolescent outcomes. Coleman (1988) described social capital in the family context as the outcome of a parent's physical presence and attention, dependent on investment of time and effort. Studies have indicated that parental involvement in a young person's life can bolster social capital, and can have a noticeable impact on academic attainment and behavioral outcomes (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; McNeal, 1999).

Peers

As children age, they typically move from being attached to their parents to being more attached to their peers (Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000). This is a necessary developmental process through which adolescents prepare to start an independent existence and, perhaps, a family of their own (Steinberg, 2008). While adolescence is a time of increased novelty seeking and risk taking, studies have suggested that it may be the influence of peers that sets this tendency into motion (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). Furthermore, studies have consistently shown that adolescents who engage in deviant behavior are likely to have friends who also engage in this behavior (Prinstein, Boergers, & Spirito, 2001; Maxwell, 2002). While peers can be an important source of support for an adolescent, getting in with the “wrong crowd” can be detrimental (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999). Studies also suggest that perception of peer behavior may be an equal or greater determinant of behavior than peers' actual involvement in risk behavior (Prinstein & Wang, 2005).

Just as peers influence involvement in risk behavior, they also influence decisions about involvement in promotive or “prosocial” behavior, though less is known about this mechanism (Prinstein, Boergers, & Spirito, 2001, 2001; Maxwell, 2002). One study illustrated that adolescents' friends' behavior influenced goal pursuit, which in turn influenced prosocial behavior (Barry & Wentzel, 2006). This is in part due to the fact that adolescents spend more time observing their friends' behavior than that of non-friend peers (Crockett, Losoff, & Petersen, 1984), and are more emotionally bonded to friends than to

non-friends (Berndt & Perry, 1986), increasing the likelihood of mimicking friends' behavior. Hence, the decision to forge or maintain certain friendships is consequential.

Schools

School climate is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2009) as a measure of a school's safety (socio-emotional and physical), engagement (diversity, respect, and participation), and environment (physical, academic, health, and disciplinary). It has also been more simply defined as "the quality and character of school life" (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 182). The ongoing high level of interest in school climate is due to the fact that it is believed to affect educational outcomes and involvement in risk behaviors. It has been shown to influence factors such as student self-concept (Grobelle & Schwarzer, 1982; Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990), academic behavior (Pink, 1982), absenteeism (Reid, 1983; Reynolds et al., 1980; Sommer, 1985), suspension rates (Wu et al., 1982), drug use, and violent and aggressive behavior (Astor, Benbenishty, Zeira, & Vinokur, 2002; Welsh, 2000).

School connectedness, defined as the presence of supportive and caring relationships within schools (McNeely & Falci, 2004), is the object of increasing attention and is one aspect of the larger concept of school climate. It has been shown to enhance academic motivation (Goodenow & Grady, 1993), and teacher support specifically has been shown to delay, reduce, and reverse involvement in violence (McNeely & Falci, 2004). Other studies suggest that students who report high connectedness to school are less likely to engage in violent or deviant behavior, experience suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide, or become pregnant (Lonczak et al., 2002). They are also less likely to be truant, fight, bully, or vandalize (Schaps, 2005). Finally, they are more likely to succeed in school and to graduate (Connell et al., 1995).

Neighborhood

The overlap between neighborhood characteristics and various physical and social morbidities is well documented, revealing a clear link between poverty and poor outcomes (Furr-Holden et al., 2008; Taylor, 2001). In addition to the outward signs of disorder, known to be correlated with serious crime (Skogan, 1992), sequelae of this disorder, such as a lack of informal social control, are also linked to increased violence (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Collective efficacy, defined as "social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good" (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997, p. 918), is especially important for youth who rely on adults to help maintain the safety of their communities. Taylor (2001) argued that physical decline in neighborhoods does not harm collective efficacy as much as economic decline. Similarly, a literature review conducted by Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) concluded that higher socioeconomic status (in part defined by residents' job prestige and income) was associated with higher academic achievement and less delinquency among adolescents. According to Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, ecologically driven scholars postulate that, for children, the influence of the neighborhood may be mediated by parental behaviors whereas for adolescents, the mechanism may be more direct or may be mediated by peer activities. Neighbors' involvement in the workforce can affect adolescents' long-term outcomes in a number of ways, including through attitudes and aspirations (Holloway & Mulherin, 2004).

The Present Study

Using a positive youth development perspective, the present study sought to use qualitative methods to understand how adolescents conceive of the categories of developmental assets described above, family, peers, schools, and neighborhoods, and how access to each of these assets influences adolescents' tendency and ability to make a positive behavioral transitions. Specifically this work aims to understand ways to support youths' decisions to transition out of involvement in risk behavior.

Methods

Context

Our study took place in Baltimore, Maryland, in an urban, mainly African American community. Compared with their peers in most of Maryland, youth in Baltimore grow up witnessing the repercussions of low graduation rates and high unemployment, abetting uncertainty about the future. The five-year adjusted cohort graduation rate of African American students in Baltimore City in 2012 was 72% (Maryland Report Card, 2013). Though increasing, this stands much lower than the statewide average of 85.0% (Maryland Report Card, 2013) and the nationwide average of 74.7% (Education Week, 2013). In 2012, the unemployment rate was 10.2% for the city, (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013) much higher than the national rate of 6.7% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). The effects of this uncertainty are reflected in the high rates of hopelessness among Baltimore youth, with 27.7% reporting feeling sad or hopeless nearly every day (Centers for Disease Control, 2007). While many social problems in Baltimore are on the road to resolution, these numbers indicate a present milieu that does not nurture positive development and ready access to developmental assets in the community.

Participants

We began with a pool of participants from the Healthy Futures study (Lindstrom Johnson, Jones, & Cheng, 2014), a randomized controlled trial based in a primary care setting to improve future orientation and reduce risk behavior involvement of urban youth. Due to the nature of the intervention, youth were sampled only from the control group in an effort to yield more generalizable information. As part of the parent Healthy Futures study, participants took a survey that gathered the demographic information as participant's reported involvement in a range of risk behaviors. The survey from this study was used solely for participant demographic data and involvement in risk behavior. All participants were African American and ranged in age from 17 to 22. Slightly more females than males (55.6%) participated in an interview (see Table 1 for details). Most participants (77.8%) reported that their mother had at least a high school education. The MacArthur scale of Subjective Social Status (Goodman et al., 2001), was used to assess where participants saw their family compared with other families in American society. Higher values on this scale indicate greater perceptions of status. On average, our participants rated their family a 5.0 on a 10-point scale, which is slightly lower than the 6.6 average found in a similar sample of African American adolescents (Goodman et al., 2003). The majority of our participants reported no involvement in most measured risk behaviors in the past 30 days, including carrying a weapon (n=2; 11%), getting in a physical fight (n=3; 17%), or using alcohol (n=3;

17%) or marijuana (n=3; 17%). Twenty-two percent of participants (n=4) endorsed involvement in multiple risk behaviors. Interestingly, at the time of the survey, just under half of our participants reported ever having had sex (n=8; 44%).

Procedure

We first contacted the youth from the Healthy futures study (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2014) by letter informing them of the study and then by follow-up phone call. Sixty youth were sent a letter with 20 successfully reached; 18 youth completed interviews. Youth who completed interviews were not significantly different than those who did not in terms of age, gender, race, or current educational status. We decided that saturation had been reached when youths' responses became predictable and additional data did not generate more information (see Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Prior to interviewing, consent to participate (for those youth 18 years or older) or parental consent and youth assent to participate (for those youth under age 18) was obtained. Interviewees received \$30 remuneration. All study procedures were approved by Johns Hopkins School of Medicine Internal Review Board.

Participants were interviewed at a date and time of their convenience at the pediatric primary care clinic where they routinely received care between August and October 2013. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by a trained interviewer and lasted between 32 and 75 minutes in length, with an average of 50 minutes. Participants were allowed to stop the interview at any time, and to skip any question or topic that they did not wish to talk about.

Notes were taken to supplement the audio recording made of each interview, and a summary was written immediately following each interview to highlight the most salient aspects and to help identify the point at which saturation was reached.

Measures

The interview guide centered on how youths' support systems affected their involvement in risk behaviors and, subsequently, their plans for the future. Questions were grouped by socioecological contexts thought to be important for supportive developmental assets (i.e., family, peers, school, and neighborhood). See Table 2 for a detailed description of interview prompts. Participants were also asked to talk about past experiences, and a life history calendar was employed in order to help with orientation and facilitate accurate reporting (see Freedman et al., 1988; Hagemaster, 1992; Haglund, 2004).

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed by an independent company in batches of five, allowing for coding to begin as an iterative process. First cycle coding supported better understanding of nuances that the youth themselves brought to our attention, and allowed for the question guide to be updated as the interviews continued (see Saldaña, 2012). Transcripts were checked against the original audio files to ensure accuracy.

Two coders worked together to confirm that codes were applied in a dependable and trustworthy manner. A total of 74 codes were generated using the method of constant

comparison (Glaser, 1964) and systematically applied to the 18 transcripts using ATLAS.ti version 7.1.6, software built for organizing and analyzing qualitative data (Scientific Software Development, 1999). Based on line-by-line examination, we discussed code definitions and refined both the definitions and the codes themselves to create our final codebook. Five transcripts were randomly selected for double-coding to ensure rigor in the application of the codebook.

Results

Themes

Four contexts for the formation of developmental assets including family, peers, school, and neighborhood were analyzed, and patterns regarding their influence on behavior emerged from all participants. After categorizing these four key contexts and investigating the different ways in which they were expressed, we looked for ways in which they influenced adolescents' reported behavioral transitions. Forty-four percent of our participants disclosed one or more experiences that were coded as demonstrating a behavioral transition (n=8). An example of a behavioral transition is a participant reporting that he used to stay out late partying and neglecting his school work, but at some point changing his ways and becoming a focused and accomplished student.

Family support—Family support was typically discussed two ways: specific, which described the experience of a few participants, and generic, which described the majority of our participants' experience.

The following illustrates how two participants' mothers offered specific support, each in her own way. The first example comes from a 17 year-old male who expressed interest in a career in music. His mother supported his aspiration by becoming involved in his school. He reported, "My mother actually talked ... a guy [into] coming to my school to help out with vocals, because we only had like an instrument teacher, a music class basically." Another participant, an 18 year-old aspiring nurse, described how her mother helps her prepare for her future, explaining, "I'm kind of a nurse-in-training because my mom, she's a nurse, and she just teaches me what she knows on weekends, because she doesn't want it to interfere with the schoolwork on weekdays." This quote illustrates how the participant formulated her present career goals based on her experience working with her mother. Her mother was able to offer concrete support in terms of motivation and providing knowledge of a potential career.

More often, participants reported receiving generic parental support. As one 20 year-old male said, "I guess she motivate[s] me ... what she wants me to do, what she expects from me." These kinds of generic parental support are exemplary of that which most participants reported. It indicates warmth combined with high expectations, both important aspects of parenting (Zhan, 2006), but illustrates a lack of transferrable assets and social capital.

Peer influence—Peer influence typically took two forms: positive or negative. However, negative peer influence manifested as either maintenance of that relationship or disassociation from it. Thus, peer influence will be discussed in three categories. "Negative

influence” describes those who saw their friends as headed in a bad direction but spent time with them regardless. “Positive influence” describes those who felt their friends were supportive of their goals and also headed in a good direction. Finally, “no influence” describes those who talked about discarding friends (usually because they were a negative influence in their life) or who avoided “friends” altogether in favor of “associates,” which we take to mean acquaintances.

In reflecting on the relationship with his friends, one 18 year-old male participant noted, “I started to hang around a bunch of people that like to party ... once you get friends, you just kind of push work to the side. It's kind of like, I'd rather hang out, like, live fast.” This young man also said that his social life negatively impacted his grades, but that he's “not letting that happen anymore,” and that he “just went through some transitions.”

Other participants described the importance of having friends who impacted their lives in a positive way. In particular, this 20 year-old male participant mentioned distancing himself from friends who threatened his personal achievement.

I'm the type where if you're going to be around me you have to have some type of positive effect on me. Like if you're not bettering me or, like, pushing me on to be more than what I am, then I don't want you around me. And it was a lot of people ... that was actually putting negative effects on me so I had to, like, distance myself from them.

Others stated that their peers bear little impact on their lives. As one 17 year-old male participant said, “I don't have many friends. I basically have social associates because to me people are kind of not as good nowadays. They want to be all up in the streets and stuff, so I keep myself away from them.”

Participants who described not having friends, or having “associates” in place of friends, reported positive behavioral transition. One 20 year-old participant, who reported that while he expected to live to see age 35, those who don't, “are the ones that used to be my friends.” Those people, he said, “just stopped coming to school. They was outside all day, every day,” and he lost touch with them. For these youth, detaching from groups that they perceived to be on a negative trajectory appears to either coincide with or spark a positive behavioral transition.

School support—School as a context for the formation of developmental assets was subdivided into supportive and non-supportive. Statements coded as supportive included those that pointed to academic engagement; teacher, counselor, or coach involvement; and the perception that the school was helping to prepare the student for the future or provided vocational support. Statements coded as non-supportive were largely the opposing manifestations of the same topics, such as not experiencing care or involvement of adults in the school. Participants reported a wide array of experiences with school support, usually in terms of connection with one or more teachers, guidance counselors, or coaches. Some students described broader, institution-level support at school, as well as vocational support. As one 20 year-old college student reflected on her high school experience:

They took us to college fairs. They took us on college tours or different schools to see the atmosphere of college. Then we did our FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] a month before we graduated, the financial aid, all of that was all ready—we was already prepared.

In contrast, one 22 year-old participant who attended an alternative high school described the limited levels of institutional support her school provided:

It wasn't really like—they didn't have no type of discipline. We did whatever we wanted. So I don't really think they prepared me, honestly. Then when I tried to go back, I was 19. They was like, “Why would you want to come back?” That's why I never finished high school.

The institution in question above seems to be lacking in a number of measures of positive school climate including safety and environmental security. In addition to the broader aspects of school climate, participants described experiencing school connectedness, the sense that adults at school care about students, or lack thereof. An 18 year-old aspiring hair stylist described an exceptionally reliable teacher, whom had a lasting impact on her, saying, “One time I was arrested and my teacher was actually there. Like, that shocked me. So I really appreciated him for that.”

Unfortunately, some participants reported not having the support of caring adults in school, or were much more ambivalent about the support they did perceive. In response to the prompt, “What do you think your teachers want for you in the future?” we saw a common, mostly positive but uncertain response similar to that of one participant, a 21 year-old male, who stated, “A couple of my teachers backed me; some of them didn't.” Many participants, when asked this question, said they did not know what their teachers wanted for them in the future, or said that they had never talked to them about it, saying that they just “never asked,” or “I'd assume they want me to do well.” This indicates the possibility that not all students are connecting with adults in their schools equally.

Not surprisingly, school support was associated with positive behavioral transition, as described by the following 18 year-old female participant:

When I was in like middle school, like I was kind of influenced by the bad crowd and started following in the wrong footsteps, and, just really bad. But then when I got to high school, I realized I wasn't in middle school anymore and I had to get like—I had to mature my attitude because I knew in high school they wasn't going to tolerate it. ... I would talk to my principal, and like I just kind of knew by the way he talked to me, like the way he would show his emotions, that I knew that that school was not going to tolerate me acting like a child, bringing my middle school problems to high school. My mom was like I had to be a new person. I had to shed my old shell and come into high school with a shinier one.

The behavioral change this participant experienced seems to have come from somewhere inside her (indicative, perhaps, of “internal assets,” (Scales et al., 2006)), and was supported by both her mother, who noticed, appreciated, and encouraged her change, and her principal, who took an active role in motivating it. While the source of her transition may have been

internal, it seems to have been the school that gave her the structure and support necessary for the transition to occur.

Another participant, a 20 year-old community college freshman, described a similar situation. She was presented the “most improved student of the year” award by her high school principal and described her transition and how it related to her school experience the following way:

They was like, “Oh my goodness, you did a whole 360, because you used to cuss us out.” I said, “I know.” I used to cuss them out all the time, like all the time. I just was an angry person and I didn't know why.

While it is not clear that school support was responsible for this participant's “360,” it is clear that school played an important role in her life at that time. She describes receiving an award from her school's principal as a poignant source of pride, and remembers what teachers said about her transformation years later. She also developed caring relationships with the teachers at her high school, even calling one her “advocate” who helped her find part-time employment.

Neighborhood support—Most participants did not initially view their neighborhoods as influential. When asked about what kinds of jobs their neighbors had, participants were typically brief, stating, for example, “My neighbors don't have jobs,” “I don't talk to my neighbors,” or “I wouldn't know how to answer that.” One participant elaborated, “I don't really get into too many people's business like that. I'm not really too social with my neighbors.” A relationship between the kinds of jobs neighbors had or even knowledge of neighbors job and positive behavioral transition was not found.

However, many participants mentioned a desire to leave their neighborhood after obtaining the economic resources to do so. One participant, a 22 year-old female who experienced a positive behavioral transition after the birth of her son, reported living in “the worst neighborhood in Baltimore.” As for how this neighborhood might influence her future, she said:

I don't know. Being as though I see so much of this world in my neighborhood, like, it just makes me want to do better each and every day. It kind of motivates me to try to get out of it.

Similarly, a 20 year-old male reporting no involvement in risk behavior and a positive outlook said about his moderately violent neighborhood, “it doesn't have any influence on [my future]. I really don't plan on being there long. Besides it pushing, making me want to, like, have my own and get away from this area. That's about the only influence.”

Finally, a 20 year-old female participant who reported a positive behavioral transition in the face of significant mental health challenges described her friend's neighborhood outside the inner city, where she prefers to spend her time, as dramatically different than her own neighborhood where “people are always getting killed.” In her friend's neighborhood, she says:

It's different when you come out the door, "Hey, how you doing today?" like that. But when you're in the city you're around a different atmosphere. You see different things. Like see people standing on the corner selling drugs, people doing everything, selling their bodies. When you go [to the other neighborhood], it's like, it's quiet. You're peaceful, you got peace of mind, you can think and just chill. So I like that life better.

She went on to describe her feelings about her own neighborhood:

There's nothing wrong with being from the hood. I would never forget where I came from because you have to start somewhere to get somewhere. So I started from the bottom, and now I'm getting to the top, and you can't be mad at me because I want better. You should want better, too. You shouldn't want this all your life. Like, who wants to live in the projects all their life? No one; like, I don't. I want a nice little apartment in the suburbs with my washing machine and dryer and all of that. And I think I deserve it because I'm working for it.

While the literature indicates that neighborhood contexts are an important aspect of understanding adolescent development, our participants did not explicitly describe how their neighborhoods promoted or hindered positive behavioral transition specifically. They did, however, cite unsafe neighborhoods as motivation for personal and professional aspiration to "do better" overall.

Other Origins of Transition

The most frequently observed contexts promoting positive behavioral transition among the participants in our study were family, friends, and school. However, there were two participants who reported dramatic behavioral transition and did not fit into this pattern, but may be indicative of a separate phenomenon. These two participants experienced what might be considered watershed moments, that is, experiences that are highly emotional and socially important that act as the fulcrum of a balance, which they managed to use to make a positive change in their lives. One 22 year-old participant, who gave birth to a child at age 15, credits her son for many of the instances in which she'd made positive changes, saying:

In middle school I thought I was bad. I just thought I could beat everybody. ... But when I got to high school, maybe it was because I had a child, I kind of calmed down a lot. But I wasn't the same person.

After describing how she once smoked marijuana "all day, every day," she said about quitting:

I tried it when I came home from the hospital. ... But then I was like, "...You know how stupid you look? Why do you smoke?" and that's exactly how I felt. So I was like, "Well, that's not something I want to do."

Another participant, aged 19, described her experience getting caught with marijuana and being placed in juvenile detention for a few of hours in tenth grade as transformative, saying, "I got caught and I got arrested, and I went to Baby Bookings [juvenile detention] and I didn't like it." She went on to explain how this experience influenced her school work, saying, "I used to be wild. I used to be disrespectful. I never went to school, never did not of

that, nothing, no homework, nothing.” She even credits this experience with shaping her desire for a career as a lawyer, saying, “I went to jail and I didn't like it, and I'm quite sure everybody else don't like jail. So I want to fight to help keep people out of jail.”

Discussion

This study indicates that youth who are engaged in risk behaviors may be capable of making the changes necessary to put themselves on a more positive path, when the conditions to do so are right across multiple ecological levels. Its strength draws from the depth of information gleaned from interviews based on a framework linking positive youth development and four contexts of developmental assets with involvement in risk and promotive behavior. Through these interviews we discovered a pattern: that youth who have specific support from family members, are able to separate themselves from deviant peer groups, or receive support at school make positive behavioral transitions. Given the setting of our study and the high-risk environment our participants grew up in, these findings are very encouraging and suggest important intervention points to help urban youth successfully transition to adulthood.

As our participants' experiences illustrate, familial support can be amorphous yet still be influential. However, few participants reported receiving specific support, which can be conceptualized as a form of social capital (Coleman, 1988). As our participants' remarks illustrated, social capital often takes the form of educational and job awareness and opportunities, which are crucial for older adolescents. One reason for this may be that few of the parents in this study had experience with higher education (see Table 1). Another possible reason for this might be the composition of our participants' families; the majority of our participants reported living with only one parent or caregiver. Studies have shown that intact families and families in which more than one parent has the primary role of child-rearing are able enhance the social capital of their children more than single-parent families (Coleman, 1988), and that children in two-parent households receive more parental attention and more hours of contact (Hao, 1994). Exploring ways to encourage and assist parents in more resource-challenged situations to provide vocational support might be one intervention strategy, as might understanding and promoting the role of other supportive adults such as mentors.

As children grow, friends become increasingly influential (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Adolescents are more likely to engage in high-risk behavior when in the presence of peers than when alone, compared to adults for whom the presence of peers made little difference (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). An enduring theory of how adolescents shape and are shaped by peers describes a dynamic unfolding between selection of friends and socialization by those friends (Kandel, 1978). Furthermore, the theme of friends with no influence on the participant's life is interesting and not well understood. It seems that while teens and young adults are aware of the negative behaviors of peers and realize that they could befriend these individuals, they sometimes choose not to, keeping them instead at arm's length as “associates.” The ability to distance oneself from the influence of peers involved in deviant behavior was very important in determining whether a participant reported making a positive behavior transition. Monahan and colleagues (2009)

incorporated “resistance to peer influence,” measured with the Resistance to Peer Influence scale (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007), as one aspect of psychosocial maturity in their study on adolescent desistance from antisocial behavior. Otherwise, little is known about the dissolution of adolescent friendships, especially those of disadvantaged populations, but appears to be very influential on adolescents who make positive behavioral transitions. Whereas previous qualitative work suggests that detachment from negatively influential peers may happen naturally, almost unconsciously (Mulvey & LaRosa, 1986), our participants described deliberate separation from these groups. Because peer relationships are so important to healthy adolescent development, it is essential to understand how these youth receive support from other sources. Alternatively, the maintenance of “associates” may be a manifestation of weak social ties, a concept that can have a positive influence on youth development (Granovetter, 1983).

In the absence of specific support from family and peers, school support becomes critical. School connectedness, a substantial predictor of an array of outcomes including academic and behavioral (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Lonczak et al., 2002; Connell et al., 1995), stood out as an essential aspect of school climate in our analysis. While school connectedness is a construct that describes the level and amount of caring relationships a student experiences in school, in our analysis of this context we looked mainly at those between adults in the school and students rather than between peers. Vocational support, another aspect of school climate that serves to broaden adolescents’ opportunities, was also important. The fact that there is a ratio of one counselor per 471 high school students in the US points to an area in need of research and improvement (American School Counselor Association, 2010-2011). These findings suggest that encouraging both connection to adults in the school as well as the provision of specific career supports in schools could assist youth not just in preventing involvement with risk behaviors, but transitioning out of involvement in risk behaviors.

The vast majority of participants described discomfort in their current neighborhoods, and of those, most expressed a desire to “get out” and “do better” both for themselves and for their future families. We did not observe a pattern linking perceived neighborhood influence with positive behavioral transition. While our participants described their neighborhoods as a source of motivation, often describing their neighborhoods with strong emotion, it is not clear what aspects of the neighborhood, beyond this, help young people make positive behavioral transitions. Most participants described a tremendous lack of collective efficacy. However, as Sampson and colleagues (1997) warn, this is not a call for neighborhoods to “get their act together” and does not negate the need for macro level actions addressing inequality. Fullilove's (2004) analysis of “root shock” as an influence on neighborhood adjustment or lack thereof also emerged among some participants who reported maintaining relationships with friends from former neighborhoods after moving to “better” neighborhoods. The influence of neighborhood on youth behavioral transition is an important area for future study.

Our study also provides examples of youth who made positive behavioral transitions after encountering significant challenges. However, this type of response to such a challenge is the exception, not the rule: a finding corroborated by an earlier qualitative study on youth

desistance from criminal behavior (Mulvey & LaRosa, 1986). Recidivism rates among adolescents are high (Sheldon, 1999), and it is axiomatic that the earlier in life one encounters the justice system, the longer they are exposed to the threat of reoffending (Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001). Adolescent pregnancy is a similarly complicated subject. Teen childbearing is associated with a range of negative outcomes for both mother (Hotz, McElroy, & Sanders, 1997) and child (Chen et al., 2007; Jaffee et al., 2001). While viewed as an event to be avoided, some have suggested that the negative outcomes associated with teen childbearing have been exaggerated (SmithBattle, 2007), and its utility as a pathway into adulthood under-appreciated (Burton, 1990).

Limitations

As in most qualitative research, the sample size makes generalizability difficult. Those who chose to participate may indeed be in some way different from those whom we reached out to but chose not to participate. Additionally, our sample was drawn from patients at a pediatric health clinic, further differentiating them from their peers who do not seek health care services. Recall bias may also be a concern as we were asking youth to discuss behavioral transitions that occurred in the past. In order to address the threat of recall bias, we employed a life history calendar to help orient participants and enhance their memory of past events. Social desirability bias was more difficult to control, especially given the personal nature of in-depth interviews. However, this does not greatly influence the conclusions of the present analysis except to say that our findings could be conservative. Additionally, there are important ecological influences that were not probed for and did not emerge organically during our interviews. For example, faith and faith-based organizations are often very important to youth behavior and outcomes (see Barnes et al., 2012). This could be an area ripe for further research.

Suggestions for Future Research

We suggest that, of the four factors analyzed, school is the most readily mutable. School connectedness as a variable in the equation of successful adolescent development is attractive because it may be modified by informed individuals within schools, whom can be targeted as agents of change, making it an area of importance for public health researchers and practitioners. A number of aspects of school connectedness that may be acted upon by teachers and school administrators have been laid out and described (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Additionally, vocational support within schools is an avenue ripe for exploration and one that aligns with the educational system's current focus on promoting the acquisition of competencies (e.g., the Common Core standards) (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2012).

This paper serves as an illustration that youth who are traditionally classified as “bad kids”, as some of the youth we interviewed even thought of themselves at some point in their past, can and do change when given the right support. It highlights some very important aspects of the present experience of adolescents living in a high-risk, urban environment. Positive behavioral transition, that is, moving away from involvement in risk behaviors toward healthier, more positive behaviors, was well represented among our participants. Participants’ explanations for their ability to make these transitions clustered around three

contexts of “external” developmental assets—parental support, peer influence, and school support. Within these contexts, we found specific parental support, the ability to detach from deviant peer groups, and vocational support within schools to be particularly helpful to youth. These findings suggest important questions for future study, and more research needs to be conducted to better understand the relative importance of family, peer, and school support on an adolescent's ability to transition from involvement in risk behavior to more positive behavioral patterns.

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Table 1

Participant Characteristics	
Demographic	n=18 (100%)
Sex	
Male	8 (44.4)
Female	10 (55.6)
Race	
Black	18 (100)
Is a Parent	
Yes	2 (11.1)
No	16 (88.9)
Maternal Education *	
Some college/trade school	5 (27.8)
High school diploma/GED	9 (50.0)
Dropout/no GED	4 (22.2)
Current Education Level	
Some college/trade school	7 (38.9)
High school diploma/GED	3 (16.7)
Current high school student	7 (38.9)
Dropout/no GED	1 (5.6)
Age	mean (SD)
	18.9 (1.5) years
SSS-Society *	5.0 (2.0)

* Data gathered from Health Futures survey.

Table 2

Section 1: Contexts of Support	
Prompt	Domain [*]
What do your parents want for you in the future?	Family
How do your parents support your future hopes?	Family
What do you think your friends will do in the future?	Peers
How do you think your friends' activities influence their futures?	Peers
Have you talked/did you talk with your teachers about your future hopes?	School
What do you think your teachers want/wanted for you in the future?	School
What jobs do your neighbors have?	Neighborhood
How do you think your neighborhood influences your future decisions?	Neighborhood
Does violence in your neighborhood influence how you think about the future?	Neighborhood
Section 2: Aspirations and Behaviors	
Prompt	Domain
When you were about X years old, or in 5 th grade, what did you want to be when you grew up?	Aspiration
What do you want to be now? Why did you change your mind?	Aspiration
What kind of student would you say you are/were?	Aspiration
Are you a better or worse student than you expected to be when you were younger?	Aspiration
Can you tell me about an important success you have had?	Aspiration
How do/did your future plans influence your decision to be involved with violence?	Promotive Behavior
How do/did your future plans influence your decision to use drugs/alcohol?	Promotive Behavior
How do your future plans influence your decisions around sex?	Promotive Behavior

* Table 2 describes the domains in which prompts fall, using the term “aspiration” to refer to future plans.