Positive Youth Development in Preadolescence: The Contribution of Recent Theoretical Paradigms and Positive, Strengths Based Interventions

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Summary. An increasing number of studies has been conducted on preadolescents development adopting a "positive view" of them rather than focusing on problems they may encounter while growing up. Three different perspectives have been evidenced in the literature and summarized in this paper, namely Positive Youth Development (PYD) which has its roots in the Developmental System Theory, Positive Psychology with attention to values and strengths and, thirdly, Life Design a recently developed approach in career counseling studies. With the analysis of studies carried out with preadolescents according to each of the considered perspectives, the relevance of addressing positive characteristics of preadolescents and fostering their development is underlined. Relevant interventions adopting a positive approach are described with an emphasis on positive changes prompted by these activities during preadolescence. Finally, conclusions about effectiveness of positive, strength based interventions and on their potential in prevention are proposed with suggestions for future programs.

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Introduction

Development is a process of growth and increasing competence. A large corpus of studies has been nonetheless articulated about "how things go wrong" rather than how they go right. More recently, however, a paradigm shift has emerged and studies have been carried out according to a "positive view" of development in adolescents and, in a more limited extent, in preadolescents. This perspective contrasts with more traditional approaches that have focused on problems that young people may encounter while growing up, such as learning difficulties, antisocial conducts, affective disorders. It introduces a more affirmative and welcome vision of young people (Damon, 2004) and of their development. This choice is also in line with what World Health Organization (WHO, 2001) suggests about participation and wellbeing.

A positive perspective of development recognizes that all preadolescents have strengths and that youth will develop in positive ways when these strengths are aligned with resources for healthy development. It emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people including those with vulnerability.

Several lines of research emerge from the literature, which underline the relevance of addressing positive characteristics and resources in individuals. The first derives from Developmental System Theory and is focused on Positive Youth Development; the second refers to positive psychology and studies on values and virtues, in particular on hope and optimism; a third, more recent one derives from career counselling and is known as Life Design.

Developmental System Theory and Positive Youth Development

A first useful framework to understand the individual and contextual variables' influencing positive youth development outcomes is the Developmental System's Theory (Lerner, 2004; Overton, 2013). However, it is the mutual interaction between individual characteristics and the context, described in terms of person-environment relationships, the focus of the positive youth developmental theory (Lerner, 2004). In an adaptive development these mutual relations provide advantages both for the individual and the context (Brandstädter, 2006) and will result in an adaptive development of individuals interests, values, and needs from the contexts (Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2008). The intentional adjustment that is achieved through the integration of individual strengths with the

environment resources includes goals setting, optimal use of resources and strategies to achieve these goals and change in the actions undertaken in presence of barriers in order to achieve the goal (Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2008). These studies have led to developing a research direction, strengths based model of positive youth development (PYD).

This model is based on Eccles and Gootman (2002), and Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) works. It has been operationalized by Lerner and colleagues (2005) and encompasses 5 components: *Competence* regards positive view of one's actions in domain-specific areas including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational which involves work habits and career choice explorations; *Confidence* refers to an internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy; *Connection* regards positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in bidirectional and mutual exchanges between the individual and peers, family, school, and community; *Character* refers to the respect for societal and cultural rules, having standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality), and integrity; finally, *Caring and Compassion* refers to a sense of sympathy and empathy for others. According to this model when these 5C are synergically expressed in adolescents, they are more likely to develop trajectories to contribute to a positive growth of family, community and civil society. In other words, the positive trajectories over the life are the result of mutual relations between the person and the context features that support and promote the growth, and all this comprises benefits for both the person and social system.

Studies on PYD conducted by Phelps and colleagues provide supporting evidence to this model (Lerner et al., 2005; Phelps et al., 2007, 2009); preadolescents who showed high levels of PYD over time also showed poor outsourcing and insourcing behaviors; those who showed a decrease in the PYD levels were more likely to manifest more negative behaviors. In addition, in a longitudinal perspective, those who increased their PYD levels were more likely to manifest initially high internalization behaviors that decreased over time and maintained a low externalizing behaviors levels. Similar results have been obtained by Lewin-Bizan et al. (2010) involving 9-15 years old participants. The model was also confirmed with youth of 13-16 years old by Bowers et al. (2010) and by Sun and Shek (2012) who in more details highlighted that positive youth development positively correlates with life satisfaction and negatively correlates with adolescents problem behaviors.

Support for the role of active participation in leisure time activities on positive adjustment comes from other studies (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009) showing that the more activities are organized

and include physical and psychological safety, supervision and guidance by unrelated adults, contact with prosocial peers, support for efficacy and opportunities for skill building, the more positive is youth development (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012).

It is also worth mentioning results from Schmid and colleagues' work (2011) which suggest that hope for the future may be important in the development of positive outcomes across adolescence. Hopeful future, in fact, seems to be a strong predictor of higher PYD score and membership in the most favorable trajectories. Both personal characteristics and contextual opportunities seem then to play a role in the development of positive youth development.

Positive Psychology and positive development in preadolescents

A second positive perspective in studies on preadolescents' development can be found in positive psychology. Several studies have been devoted to the development of positive traits (here named values or strengths) which reflect thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. They are described as traits and true psychological resources but not as fixed personality characteristics (Park &Peterson, 2006). They are sensitive to change and development, and assume a specific and different meaning in different living conditions across life span (Park & Peterson, 2006). These values and strengths are grouped in six large "families": wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Values underscoring a personal view (such as loving and courage) are contrasted with civic values, which guide individuals toward being active and responsible citizens (such as responsibility and tolerance). Values and strengths develop across life span along with a time perspective valuing past experiences (e.g., gratitude and forgiveness), strengths characterizing present life (e.g., temperance and self-regulation) but, most interestingly, valuing strengths of the future such as courage, hope, and optimism. Managing new capacities, knowledge, curiosity, openness to new experiences, and exploration are included as more cognitive values thus subsuming a positive orientation of the individual toward his future.

Several studies have shown the role that values and strengths can play on identity construction and on a balanced affectivity, which is considered an index of harmonic and adaptive development (Weber, Ruch, Littman-Ovadia, Lavy, & Gai, 2013). Additionally, research studies support the role of strengths and values on satisfaction and self-efficacy experienced in school life, school success, confidence in the possibility to

improve personal skills, on quality of life experienced and in positive behaviours expressed in school context (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009; Park & Peterson, 2006).

However, longitudinal studies conducted according to this approach have also underlined the prospective meaning of these values on quality of life on later ages (Park & Peterson, 2006) thus underscoring their relevance on future life construction. Both educational activities and everyday life exercises have been accordingly developed and disseminated in order to boost happiness and wellbeing.

Life Design and positive development in preadolescents

A third approach that emphasizes the relevance of focusing on positive aspects of development is Life Design. This paradigm has been recently developed taking into account the complexity and dynamics, which characterize current times, and the difficulties individuals experience in constructing career trajectories (Savickas et al., 2009). This motivates the interest in people's future much earlier than when they have to face difficulties or risk situations; it also underscores the need of developing and implementing preventive actions fostering strengths and resources in order to guarantee a satisfying quality of life and wellbeing.

A central dimension in Life Design is career adaptability, a psychosocial construct reflecting resources relevant for managing work and career challenges that may affect participation to personal life (Savickas, 2005). Career adaptability resources are described as self-regulatory capacities that may change over time and situations, and that are activated by factors within the person, the environment, and their interaction (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Core career adaptability resources are: *Concern*, which describes the extent to which the individual is future oriented and prepared for upcoming tasks and challenges. It includes optimism and propensity to envisage the future; *Control* which is defined as the extent to which the individual takes personal responsibility with regard to personal development; *Curiosity*, which involves exploring possible future selves and opportunities; and *Confidence* which refers to personal beliefs and hopes about the possibility to reach goals, successfully solve problems and overcome obstacles (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Recent studies on career adaptability involving preadolescents have underlined the role of these resources at this age, insofar career adaptability not only seems to contribute to predicting the level of control over personal life and the perceived well-being; it also predicts the realism and stability

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of the aspirations they start articulating (Hirshi, 2009, 2010). Additionally, a study conducted in the Larios laboratory and described by Sgaramella (2015) involving 75 preadolescents attending middle school supports this view and suggests a positive relationship between hope and optimism on one hand and, respectively, present life (namely active citizenship), and future orientation (namely confidence in the possibility of reaching personal future goals) thus underlying the relevance of fostering these resources for both a satisfying present and a positive future orientation.

The attention to the future so clearly expressed by these resources underline the preventive structure of this approach. A focus is in fact on promoting future career by planning individual, small- and large-group prevention programs to be implemented before a career transition occurs, before an unexpected event makes a person more vulnerable. These interventions stimulate positive person-environment interactions; promote proactive career behaviours; focus on developing and applying different resources for positive career development.

Results of studies previously mentioned underline the relevance of fostering positive development in preadolescence and support the relevance of interventions already at this stage, i.e. when individuals start to think more about the future, imagine themselves growing up, reflect on the kind of work they might do (Savickas et al., 2009).This is particularly true in current times and in the next future, given that they will be more and more frequently required to construct their future in a continuously changing context, where linearity of professional trajectories is not any more useful for future planning (Savickas et al., 2009), to face unexpected challenges and barriers, to activate and maintain energies and resources (Nota, Ginevra, & Santilli, 2015).

Person centered interventions to promote positive development trajectories

The analysis sketched above and the empirical contributions mentioned on the one hand underline the role of complex, multifaceted, interrelated variables in positive development and on the other testify a shift which has been also paralleled by attempts to make a similar choice in interventions. Authors of an increasing number of programs refer either to PYD, to positive psychology, or to Life Design studies. They focus on building on the existing strengths of vulnerable youth and providing them with the additional support and tools needed to achieve their potentials. Even the most disadvantaged youths are recognized the capacity to change

their behavior, develop new cognitive and behavioral skills, cultivate different interests, and establish new social relationships (Lerner, 2004).

Although a model of positive youth development intervention is far from being structured and still awaits for empirical supports (Brink & Wissing, 2012), intervention programs aimed at promoting strengths, behaviors, attitudes, and positive resources relevant for development and career construction, such as hope, optimism, and career adaptability (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Savickas et al., 2009). Two guiding lines can be evidenced in these actions, used to describe them in the following sections. The first one mainly focuses on fostering hope and optimism as strengths that sustain agentic behaviours and well being. The second one regards dimensions considered relevant for career construction and life design.

Fostering positive resources for wellbeing and future orientation. Some structured interventions have been reported in literature to promote preadolescents' hope. A program for preadolescents was developed by Pedrotti, Lopez, and Krieshok (2000) that aimed at enhancing hope through five weekly 45-minute sessions. The five sessions were developed step-by-step to teach participants the Snyder's (2000) hope theory, through the use of posters, cartoons, narratives, and board game. During the teaching units, the authors proposed stories of hopeful characters to encourage participants in thinking about goals, agency, and pathways. In order to verify the efficacy, prior to the beginning of the program all students were given the Children's Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1997). A control group also was identified and administered the measure as well. Upon completion of the program all students were again administered the CHS and an increase in hope scores was found to be significantly larger in the group of students who participated in the program, as compared to the control group. These results were maintained 6 weeks post-programming, suggesting that students continued in utilizing the tenets learned in the program.

More recently, based on Snyder's (2000) hope theory, Marques, Lopez, and Pais-Ribeiro (2011) developed the program "Building Hope for the Future", that included 5 weeks hope-based sessions for middle school students. The first session focused on hope theory and its importance to positive outcomes. The second was dedicated to recognize goals, pathways, and agency components of hope, and to plan personal goals. In the third, participants were encouraged to discuss about their goals and hope, to review their personal goals in order to be more specific, positive, and clearer, and to identify multiple pathways and positive thoughts to pursue their goals. The fourth focused on revision and reinforcement of personal

goals and their introduction in a personal hope story. Lastly, in the fifth session, middle school students were stimulated to review and share their personal hope stories and to think about future steps. To increase the effectiveness of the intervention, collaboration of their significant adults (parents and teachers) was also promoted. Thirty-one students attending middle school participated in the activity and a comparable number of peers were involved as a control group in the project. As the authors underline, 18 months after the intervention a higher level of hope, well-being, and self-efficacy was registered in students involved in the positive training.

As concerns optimism, a long tradition characterizes the Penn Prevention Program (Gillham, Reivich, Jaycox, & Seligman, 1995). Although this program has been developed to prevent depressive symptoms in children from 10 to 13 years old, it can be used to reinforce positive and optimistic beliefs. Specifically, it is structured in 10 sessions and aims to teach participants to identify negative beliefs and pessimistic explanations for events and to generate a more realistic explanatory style. In order to verify the efficacy, the authors (Gillham et al., 1995) followed 69 fifth and sixth grade children at risk for depression for 2 years (experimental group) and compared this group with 49 children in a matched no-treatment (control group). The experimental group reported fewer depressive symptoms through the 2-years follow- up, and moderate to severe symptoms were reduced by half.

In line with these programs, in the Italian context, Nota, Di Maggio, Santilli, and Ginevra (2013) have developed the workshop "Nuggets of optimism and hope to school" to stimulate children's and preadolescents' hope and optimism. The workshop lasts three hours and addresses the definition of optimism and the typical aspects of the optimistic person. By using specific examples from school and extra-school settings, participants are encouraged to recognize optimistic thoughts and differentiate them from negative ones, thus emphasizing the relevance of some positive thoughts and strategies for their development and future. Then the definition of hope and the characteristics of the hopeful person are provided, and participants are stimulated through exercises to identify goals for their future and hopeful and optimistic solutions to achieve them. The workshop ends with the analysis of a peer's story to single out her/his optimistic thoughts and the strategies she/he used to achieve her/his goals. In order to verify the efficacy of this activity, 71 elementary and middle school students were involved. Each participant, both at pre- and post-test, was asked to complete the following sentences: "The optimistic person is ...", and "The hopeful person is...". At the end of the laboratory, the participants expressed a clear understanding of the discussed topics and

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described more precise characteristics of optimism and hope then in pre-test.

Fostering resources for career development. As underlined in recent contributions from Life Design scholars, preadolescents are currently required, and they increasingly will be, to face unexpected challenges and barriers, to activate and maintain energies and resources (Nota, Ginevra, Santilli, & Soresi, 2014).

As regards career adaptability, the core resources in Life Design (Savickas et al., 2009), although career interventions have been developed for adults (Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2012), middle and late adolescents (Nota et al., 2015), and children (Nota, Santilli, & Soresi, in press), no structured interventions are being reported in literature for this developmental age. However, useful suggestions of meaningful activities to be implemented with preadolescents can be found in the literature for each component. For example, to promote career concern, practitioners are suggested to stimulate positive future orientation, reinforce positive attitudes toward planning, stimulate planning skills, and heighten career awareness; as regards control, increased control on school-career decisions can be promoted by reinforcing decisional and planning abilities; in order to increase curiosity, interventions should focus on self-exploration and understanding of the world of work; lastly, for confidence, self-efficacy beliefs and self-esteem should be promoted by using role play, social modeling, and cognitive-behavioral interventions (Hartung, 2015; Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2008; Nota et al., 2014; Savickas, 2005).

Also Sgaramella and Soresi (2014) settled the program "Thinking to me and to my future" to stimulate preadolescents' hope, optimism, and awareness of their personal coping resources to deal with known and unknown difficulties. The program developed over a three thematic weekly group activities lasting overall 8 hours, together with 3 practice weeks. During the group activities the definition and the typical aspects of respectively an optimistic and hopeful person were addressed. Similar definition of resources useful to face difficulties were analyzed. Practice activities in natural contexts, encompassing both school and family context, were used to facilitate generalization. Concrete examples from school and family life (e.g., family narratives) were used to develop reflexivity upon personal resources, positive thoughts and strategies available to them or used by relevant educational models in their personal life. Stories of positive models of peers were provided to them during the activities. At the end of each session a goal or a task was chosen by each participant to realize in the subsequent week, to accomplish in school or at home with a

peer (e.g., list good attitudes of my classmate) or a family member (e.g., collect a story positively ended up about first years of my life, collect stories about my family member).

Eighty students were involved, half of them as active participants to the program and half as a control group. Dimensions analyzed in pre- and post-test sessions were: career adaptability resources with the *Career Adapt-Abilities Scale* (Di Maggio, Ginevra, Nota, Ferrari, & Soresi, 2015); hope and optimism with *Visions About Future* (Ginevra et al., under review); resilience and time perspective with *Design My Future* (Santilli et al., 2015); adaptive behaviors, personal relationships and self-disclosure with *How do I behave with* others (Soresi & Nota, 2007) and, finally, commitment with school and study requirements, and decision making with *Me, school, and studying* (Soresi & Nota, 2007). A multivariate analysis of variance showed significant changes in the level of hope, resilience, and time perspective. Adaptability resources they ascribe themselves also increased. As regards participation in the school context and involvement in school, a higher interest in interpersonal relationships and commitment with school goals was observed, thus suggesting that working on attitudes toward future and future challenges may also foster positive attitudes toward persons in the current context with a preventive value against non-adaptive and risky behaviours.

Interestingly, the analysis of change in participants who at the beginning of the activity showed a low level of adaptability, i.e. limited resources to face future unexpected transition or difficulties, supported the sensitivity to changes of these resources specifically for those individuals who because of the limited level of ability referred to are more at risk in facing transitions. Additionally, both at the beginning of each session and at the end of the whole activity, participants were also asked to define respectively hope, optimism, and a useful strategy with their own words and were given the possibility to compare the definitions given in the two assessment points. A development in reflexivity and in the awareness of their learning process was also observed.

Finally, it is worth mentioning an example of intervention where new technologies to engaging preadolescents in constructing their future careers have been used. Specifically, Nota, Santilli, & Soresi (in press) developed an online career program "1,2,3…Future!" to support middle school students in reflecting on some relevant resources of their professional planning. The 6 hours online intervention are organized in three stages (steps), each of which starts with a 15-minute video showing specific instructions on variables that the students will later be asked to reflect on. More specifically, the first video (first step) emphasizes the

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relevance of thinking about the future, and taking responsibility for own future; the second one focuses on the importance of investing in education and training, in relation to the current society; and the third highlights the advantages of having multiple goals and multiple strategies to pursue them in the future. After the presentation of the video, in the first and second meeting, students are invited to answer different online questionnaires and, at the end of the second step, they receive a personalized report describing the strengths they recognize themselves. In addition, at the end of the third step, participants are invited to write down two goals in line with their strengths and their wishes. The analyses carried out by the authors to verify the effectiveness of the program showed that, at post-test middle school students that participated to this online-program had higher levels of career adaptability and life satisfaction than peers in the control group. Dimensions of career adaptability were assessed by *Career and Education Decision Status Scale* (Gati et al., 2011; for concern), Locus of Control subscale of the *Ideas and Attitudes on School-Career Future - Middle School Version* (for control; Soresi & Nota, 2007), *Career Adapt-Abilities Scale-Italian Form* (Soresi, Nota, & Ferrari, 2012; for curiosity). Quality of life was evaluated by *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Moreover, a qualitative analysis regarding their wishes about the future was carried out on answers produced in completing the statement "About my future, what I desire most is...". Participants indicated more key aspects of Life Design dimensions, such as self-determination and attention to choice processes, descriptions of work activities rather than simply mentioning a specific job; they wrote about expectations and goals about their future, personal strengths, life satisfaction, relationships and investment in education.

Conclusions and future directions

Although more studies are needed with higher numbers of participants, several preliminary conclusions can be drawn from programs and activities described above:

1. It is possible to foster positive characteristics and attitudes during preadolescence with short and group activities which may also be proposed using more friendly modalities;
2. A change can be activated in resources dealing with both personal well-being (personal strengths), active participation in current life school context (interpersonal relationships and commitment with

school goals) and with future construction (attitudes toward future and future challenges, adaptability resources);

3. From a primary prevention perspective, it could be advantageous to involve preadolescents in projects that take into account at the same time important dimensions within positive development perspective and, more particularly, Life Design resources, such as career adaptability, hope, optimism. Positive outcomes of these activities can be facilitation of positive behaviors in group context, a protective factor against non-adaptive and risky behaviours.

Person-centered interventions described above aimed at building skills in order to foster positive development and strengthen protective abilities (Nota et al., 2015; Vera & Polanin, 2012). Environment-centered prevention programs should be also developed with the aim of influencing the system in which individuals live, such as family, peers, and school (Vera & Polanin, 2012). Besides testing the efficacy of these interventions with appropriate follow-up activities, future research studies should, also test interventions helping parents and teachers recognize and promote their children's and students' strengths and resources, This will also help developing a more structured, integrated model of positive intervention where complex, multifaceted, interrelated variables characterizing preadolescent development will be taken into account.

Notes

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