Positive Youth Development & Spirituality
Contents

Foreword vii
Peter L. Benson
Preface xi

1. Positive Development, Spirituality, and Generosity in Youth: An Introduction to the Issues 3
Richard M. Lerner, Robert W. Roeser, & Erin Phelps

PART 1 Conceptual Issues in Operationalizing Spirituality in Positive Youth Development

2. The Spirit of Spiritual Development 25
Carl N. Johnson

3. Spirituality and Positive Youth Development: The Problem of Transcendence 42
W. George Scarlett

4. Spirituality as Fertile Ground for Positive Youth Development 55
Pamela Ebstyne King

5. Self and Identity Processes in Spirituality and Positive Youth Development 74
Robert W. Roeser, Sonia S. Issac, Mona Abo-Zena, Aerika Brittain, & Stephen C. Peck

PART 2 Biological Contributions to the Spirituality–PYD Relation

Elena L. Grigorenko

7. Cooperative Behavior in Adolescence: Economic Antecedents and Neural Underpinnings 128
Tomáš Paus, Simon Gächter, Chris Starmer, & Richard Wilkinson
### Contents

8. How Religious/Spiritual Practices Contribute to Well-Being:  
The Role of Emotion Regulation  
*Heather L. Urry & Alan P. Poey*

**PART 3: Individual Contributions to the Spirituality–PYD Relation**

9. The Role of Developmental Change in Spiritual Development  
*David Henry Feldman*

10. Spirituality, “Expanding Circle Morality,” and Positive Youth Development  
*Janice L. Templeton & Jacquelynne S. Eccles*

11. The Role of Spirituality and Religious Faith in Supporting Purpose in Adolescence  
*Jennifer Menon Mariano and William Damon*

12. From “Worm Food” to “Infinite Bliss”: Emerging Adults’ Views of Life after Death  
*Jeffrey Jensen Arnett*

**PART 4: Social and Cultural Contexts of the Spirituality–PYD Relation**

13. Immigrant Civic Engagement and Religion: The Paradoxical Roles of Religious Motives and Organizations  
*Lene Arnett Jensen*

14. Ethnic Identity and Spirituality  
*Linda Juang & Moin Syed*

15. Considering Context, Culture, and Development in the Relationship between Spirituality and Positive Youth Development  
*Na’ila Suad Nasir*

*Guerda Nicolas & Angela M. DeSilva*

17. Possible Interrelationships between Civic Engagement, Positive Youth Development, and Spirituality/Religiosity  
*Lonnie R. Sherrod & Gabriel S. Spiewak*

18. A Palace in Time: Supporting Children’s Spiritual Development through New Technologies  
*Marina Umaschi Bers*

List of Contributors  359  
Index  367
Foreword

Some of the most exquisite phenomena of human life are hardly visible in the behavioral sciences. Take, for example, these issues:

How persons explore the mystery of the self and the mystery of the universe;
How the many facets of development—emotional, social, cognitive, moral—are integrated into whole cloth;
How and why we create a narrative about who we are in the context of space and time. As Robert Coles has so elegantly put it, we are the creatures who, to keep from feeling alone, weave a story “to gain for ourselves a sense of where we came from and where we are and where we’re going” (1990, 8);
How art, poetry, and even religion emerge out of human imagination;
The experiences of awe and wonder and joy;
The inclination to covet community, interdependence, and connectedness;
The marshalling of personal energy and the investment of it in growth and thriving; and
The process of embedding the self in something larger than the self.

So what is this territory of human life? Certainly, there are cognitive, emotional, social, and biological factors at play. But there is something more, something that requires new thinking, new theory, and new research. We’ve got terms for this territory. Among them are spirit, spirituality, and spiritual development. The terms are alive and well in self-help sections of bookstores, in the mass media, and in daily conversation. Fields of practice, including medicine, nursing, and social work, are building a viable body of literature. But the slowest and most reticent participant in this exploration is the mainstream academy.

My field, psychology, has been particularly negligent. Recently, a team of us at the Search Institute tried to quantify this oversight. We searched the
major social science databases to determine the extent to which spirituality and spiritual development in childhood and adolescence were being addressed by the research community. We found that less than 1 percent of the published articles (from 1990 to 2002) addressed these topics (Benson, Roehlkepartain, and Rude 2003). The oversight was even more graphic when we looked at references to spiritual development in six leading human development journals (e.g., *Child Development* and *Developmental Psychology*). Across a thirteen-year period, exactly zero articles discussed spiritual development as compared to many hundreds, of course, for cognitive, psychosocial, and moral development.

Even the field of positive youth development has kept its distance from spirit. There is literature that speaks to religion and religious community as protective factors and/or as developmental assets that prevent risk behaviors and promote forms of thriving such as generosity and service. Researchers and practitioners in the youth development field tend to know this, and perhaps even tend to affirm it, but lack vocabularies and tools to explore the underlying terrain of the spiritual life. There is some movement forward, however. This volume, happily and significantly, is one of the first efforts to explore the youth development and spirituality intersection. Richard Lerner, in particular, has been an early and persuasive voice in making this link.

A variety of explanations have been given for the persistent marginalization of spirit. The prime one is the academy’s bias toward religion. Each of the human phenomena listed earlier is guilty-by-association. Religion is the social institution developed to nourish, manage, or control how persons explore spirit. To be blind to the phenomena of spirit because of their frequent cohabitation with religion is naïve and grossly unscientific. Indeed, a significant and relatively unexplored research question is how religious doctrine, ritual, and participation actually inform the process of spiritual development. But spiritual development happens with or without religion. It’s as central to and universal in human life as any of the other streams of development (e.g., cognitive, social, moral).

We still face a key definitional challenge. And that is to define spiritual development in a way that breaks the link to religion without denigrating the latter. Here’s one way of thinking about it. (It is offered and offered gently.) Spirit is an intrinsic, animating force that gives energy and momentum to human life. It also propels us to look inward to create and re-create a link between “my life” and “all life.” Spiritual development, then, is a constant, active, and ongoing process to create and re-create harmony between the “discoveries” about the
self and the “discoveries” about the nature of life-writ-large. The two journeys (inner and outer) constantly inform each other and are always brought back into balance. Within this understanding are three major dynamics in spiritual development:

Becoming aware of or awakened to the essence of the self and the essence of life-writ-large;

Seeking, accepting, and/or experiencing an interconnection between one’s inward and outward journeys in a way that brings harmony or coherence;

Living life in accord with one’s essence and one’s understanding of or connection to life-writ-large (Roehlkepartain and Benson, in press).

Though spirit has been on the back burner of scholarship, a new story is being written. We may only be in Chapter 1, but that’s progress. The idea of spirit is emerging in a variety of disciplines, particularly in those that are looking for new principles to understand movement, growth, harmony, unity, and interdependence. Physics, cosmology, and biology are beginning to play. And spirit is slowly working its way into the fields of youth development, positive psychology, and human development, and in particular, at those conceptual spaces where attention is being given to the dynamics of human thriving and flourishing.

In the developmental sciences, these are important signs of an awakening. Spiritual development sessions have recently been on the programs of the Society for Research in Child Development and the Society for Research in Adolescence. Sage has published, just in the last two years, both The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence and The Encyclopedia of Spiritual and Religious Development. For the first time in its long and illustrious history, the 2006 version of the multivolume Handbook of Child Psychology included a review chapter on spiritual development. And, thankfully, the John Templeton Foundation is supporting new work at Tufts, Stanford, Bowling Green State University, and the Search Institute.

It is as though the soul of William James, the great pioneer of psychology, has been reborn and dwells among us. To paraphrase him, “the love of life, at any and every level of development,” is the spiritual impulse. Love of life is a marvelous lens for exploring many of the vital questions of our time. It could be the wellspring for altruism, social justice, and stewardship of the earth. And when it is individually or collectively manipulated, it can be the trigger for our darkest side (e.g., genocide, terrorism, slavery).
The love of life. Spirit. It is our thinnest heritage of theory and research. And it is the line of inquiry—if we are bold enough to clarify it—that is needed to heal a broken planet.

What we need now are pioneers willing to break new ground and build the intellectual scaffolding for a science of spirit. *Positive Youth Development and Spirituality* fits the bill—and then some. This is a field building work of majestic proportions. In its multidisciplinary scope and quality, this volume advances our understanding of the ideas that should link many disciplines in a shared journey of discovery. And it powerfully advances our understanding of what it means to be fully human.

It seems like a good time to offer a benediction: may *Positive Youth Development and Spirituality* trigger a tsunami of new theory and research. It is time.

Peter L. Benson
Minneapolis, MN
January 2008

**References**


Preface

This book initiates a new phase in the study of religious and spiritual development during adolescence. First, the chapters in this book are derived from an interdisciplinary network of biologists and social and behavioral scientists. Together, these colleagues provide a holistic, systems perspective about positive youth development and spirituality. This book reflects, then, an exciting and important time in the history of the scientific study of spirituality or religiosity. It is a marker of the fact that a growing number of scholars from a variety of scientific disciplines are seeking to explore the role of religion and spirituality in adolescent development.

Second, the focus of this book is on positive development during adolescence—on what goes right during the teenage years—and how spirituality and spiritual development can contribute to the positive development of diverse adolescents. Although the study of positive youth development had been a burgeoning area of scientific study for approximately fifteen years, only a relatively few scholars to date have explored the relation of youth spirituality and religiosity to positive development, despite its salience in the lives of millions of youth (e.g., Roehlkepartain et al. 2006).

Our intent is that the present book will frame—theoretically and methodologically—how the connection between spiritual development and positive youth development may be explored at the levels of biology, the individual, social settings, and culture. The chapters in this book provide heretofore unavailable discussions of conceptual/theoretical, definitional, and methodological issues that need to be addressed in understanding the connections between spirituality and positive youth development and the conditions of the individual and context enabling spirituality to promote or reduce positive youth development or to result in positive outcomes such as civic engagement and generosity (contribution).
The book advances the scientific study of spiritual development by detailing the key methodological challenges and choices that must be addressed to elucidate the spirituality–positive youth development relation. The contributors propose new ways of using qualitative data, physiological and brain imaging data, and a variety of quantitative techniques to address this important aspect of human development. Furthermore, across the chapters, recommendations are made about the ways in which research about the spirituality–positive youth development connection may be integral in building the larger field of spiritual development as a legitimate and active domain of developmental science.

The chapters in this book frame both this emerging field and serve as guideposts in a larger intellectual agenda for collaborative pilot research currently being conducted by the contributors to this book (a research project that is funded by the John Templeton Foundation). As such, the book serves as the intellectual forerunner of a series of new research findings, information that we hope will elicit the attention, interest, and additional research of scientists around the world. At the least, we know that our readers will be stimulated by the exciting and innovative theory and research they will find in the chapters of this book.

We would like to express our gratitude for the creativity and knowledge of the scientists who have contributed to this book. We thank all the colleagues whose have worked so hard to craft such useful and engaging chapters. It is their expertise that has made this book possible. We are grateful as well that Dr. Peter Benson, president of Search Institute, wrote such a thoughtful and supportive foreword to the book.

We appreciate also the important contributions to this book that have been made by Jennifer Davison, managing editor at the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development, and Lauren White, assistant editor at the institute. Their expertise and impressive productivity in guiding the development of this work through all phases of the manuscript development and production process were invaluable to us.

We are grateful also for the support of and the commitment to quality scholarship of our publisher, Templeton Foundation Press. Its enthusiasm for, and expertise in, publishing high-quality work elucidating the links between human developmental science and spirituality have been vital in pursuing and completing our work.

We also are deeply appreciative of the support provided to us by the John Templeton Foundation. The collaborations among the scholars contributing
to this volume, and the science that has been produced, could not have happened without the vision and support of the Foundation.

Finally, our work on Positive Youth Development and Spirituality: From Theory to Research has been framed by the intellectual leadership of Sir John M. Templeton. In writings such as The Humble Approach: Scientists Discover God (1995) and Possibilities for Over One-Hundredfold More Spiritual Information (2000), Sir John stressed the importance of generating new spiritual knowledge to help direct the lives of youth along positive life paths. Inspired by his vision, we undertook the scholarly work represented in this volume. As such, we dedicate this book to him.

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Medford, MA
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REFERENCES
Positive Youth Development & Spirituality
The purpose of this book is to explore the study of spiritual development during the adolescent period (the second decade of life; Lerner and Steinberg 2004) and to ascertain the possible links among spirituality and the healthy, positive development of youth. Adolescence is a time of life when young people are prototypically engaged in finding a self-definition—an identity (e.g., Erikson 1959, 1968; Harter 2006)—that enables them to matter to self, family, and society, both in the teenage years and in their future adult life. The search for such an identity impels the young person to transcend a cognitive and emotional focus on the self (Elkind 1967) and to seek to contribute in important, valued, and even noble ways to his or her world. We believe that generosity that is derived from such transcendence and noble purpose is the essence of spirituality (see, too, Damon 2004; Damon, Menon, and Bronk 2003) and may provide a key foundation for positive youth development (Lerner 2008).

To frame our consideration of the links among positive development, spirituality, and generosity (or contribution) among youth, we use an approach to theory that, today, is at the cutting edge of developmental science, i.e., developmental systems theory (Damon and Lerner 2006; Lerner 2002, 2006). Developmental systems theory is an ideal model within which to explore the integration of self and context that we believe is involved in these links and, as well, to consider the potential impact on positive development and spirituality of the
numerous biological, psychological, behavioral, and sociocultural changes converging within the adolescent period. In fact, in affording an integrative perspective to biological through sociocultural levels of organization, developmental systems theory allows science to consider within common research programs the emerging findings pertinent to neural, socioemotional, cultural, and historical influences on adaptive (healthy, positive) adolescent development that, today, are at the fore of the study of this pivotal period of life.

Accordingly, in this book we explore key conceptual and definitional issues useful in framing the understanding of the association between positive development in adolescents, spiritual development, and the attainment of a sense of self that moves the young person to make contributions to (or, in other words, be generous toward) self, family, community, and society. In addition, we discuss the biological covariates of these links among positive youth development (PYD), spirituality, and generosity and, as well, the individual-level, social-level, and cultural-level covariates of this linkage. All chapters in the book focus as well on the research that needs to be done to advance understanding of these linkages.

To prepare for these discussions, the present chapter presents a developmental systems model of the relations among the positive development of adolescents and the development of their spirituality and generosity. In the context of the model, we describe the extant, and admittedly limited, neuropsychological, behavioral, and social-relational data pertinent to the covariation among positive development, spirituality, and generosity. Because of the limits of existing data, we specify also some of the key features of to-be-conducted developmental research that is needed to elucidate these relations; for instance, we discuss the importance of longitudinal research with youth from diverse religious, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. The chapter ends with a brief overview of the plan of, and the chapters in, this book.

**Positive Youth Development and Spirituality: A Developmental Systems Model**

How does human development, in general, and positive and healthy human development, in particular, happen? What are the processes that enable humans to adapt and thrive across their life spans? Are the bases of positive human development ones shared completely by other organisms, or are there features of development that are unique to humans? Are answers to these ques-
tions the same across the human life span, or are the explanations of positive development at least in part discontinuous across the course of ontogeny?

Answers to these questions address the foundations of developmental science. We believe that theoretically useful and empirically rich answers can best be derived from models derived from developmental systems theories of human development (Lerner 2002, 2006).

Within the frame of developmental systems theories, positive human development involves adaptive (i.e., health promoting) regulations (Brandstädter 1998, 2006) involving individuals and the ecology of human development. Represented as individual ↔ context relations, these associations involve mutually influential exchanges between person and context that are beneficial to both entities. Humans’ evolutionary heritage established mutually supportive individual ↔ context relations as integral for human survival (Gould 1977; Johanson and Edey 1981), and this phylogeny is repeated in ontogeny, where individuals must support a context that supports them if humans are to survive and prosper across life (Lerner 2004).

Adaptive developmental regulations involve, for instance, changing the self to support the context and altering the context to support the self. Such efforts require the individual to remain committed to contributing to the context and to possess, or to strive to develop, the skills for making such contributions. In turn, there is a requirement that the institutions of society support people in their individual attempts to find the means across life to thrive. A commitment to maintaining the social institutions that, in turn, provide the person with the opportunity to flourish as a healthy individual is not only the operationalization of adaptive developmental regulation; as well, the continuity of such structural relations across life is the process of positive human development, of “thriving” (Lerner 2004).

Derived from the neotenous phylogenetic history of humans (Gould 1977), that is, the slowing down or “retardation” of the rate of development in comparison to ancestral species, adaptive developmental regulations provide an ontogenetic basis for postulating that, in life periods of marked individual and social change—for instance, in human adolescence (Lerner and Steinberg 2004)—the positive development of people involves convergences in neural, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social developments. In adolescence, for instance, when there is new brain growth, as well as qualitative and quantitative changes in individual characteristics (involving affective, cognitive, and behavioral attributes) and social relations (with family members, peers, and