



RESEARCH PROJECT OUTLINE

Research and Graduate Education ♦ College of Agricultural Sciences
The Pennsylvania State University ♦ University Park, Pennsylvania

Title: Risk and resiliency in youth, families, and communities and positive development promotional strategies and interventions

Probable Duration: 60 months (July 1, 2006 through June 30, 2011)

Personnel:

Project Leader(s):

Daniel F. Perkins (25%)
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PSU Collaborators:

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Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management.

Extension Collaborators:

Richard Spoth
Iowa State (PROSPER project)

Justification, Relevance, and Expected Outcomes:

In the last thirty years of the 20th century, social and economic changes have had a tremendous impact on youth, families, and communities across America, as well as in Pennsylvania. The electronic revolution has changed the world dramatically, speeding up the pace of life and eroding the country's sense of community. At the same time, plummeting wages, lengthening work weeks, joblessness, and rising job insecurity means that most Americans are working longer hours for less pay (Coontz, 2000; Hewlett and West, 1998). These global, social, and economic changes have been linked to changes in the structure of families and communities. Family members are often stressed and may not spend any regular, meaningful time together as a group; children increasingly are left home alone (Coontz, 2000; Pipher, 1996). Communities, once a source of support, companionship, and mutual protection, are being eroded (Puttman, 2000; Pipher, 1996). Moreover, while these global and social changes have increased the advancement opportunities for girls and minority youth, they have also encouraged an increasing number of youth to engage in risk behaviors. This increase has been associated with these shifts in community cohesion as well as with lack of parental supervision (Hewlett & West, 1998; Pipher, 1996; Putnam, 2000).

Clearly, the recent changes in our country have resulted in new challenges for families, youth, and communities. If we are to assist people meet these new challenges, we must conduct thorough scientific studies of the risks that families, communities, and youth may encounter, and the strategies that they employ to be protected from these risks. This research project will include investigations into the risk and protective processes and their relationship to youth development, family development, and community development. The investigations from this research project will draw on a developmental-ecological framework that examines the behaviors of youth, families, and communities in terms of multiple contexts and systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner & Ford, 1992). For example, research within this project will examine the influence of relationships found within the different social-contexts of youth, such as families, peer groups, youth programs, schools, and communities. Besides exploring issues facing at-risk youth, families, and communities within this project, the building blocks of positive development or "assets" (Benson, 1997; Furstenberg, 2000; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993) needed by youth and families to be successful will also be examined. Finally, evaluative research will be conducted to provide scientifically robust information about

effective prevention and intervention strategies designed to decrease risk processes and increase resiliency (e.g., protective process and assets) in youth, their families, and the communities in which they live. The proposed research is an integration of basic and applied scholarship designed to illuminate and promote strength-based programs and policies that enhance the life chances of youth and families. In other words, programs that build resiliency in youth, families, and the communities in which they live. Thus, this research addresses two of the five CSREES national goals: Goal 2 – Support Increased Economic Opportunities and Improved Quality of Life in Rural America; and Goal 4 – Improve the Nation’s Nutrition and Health.

Previous Work (Background) and Present Outlook:

This project will use an explanatory approach to test a risk and protective factor (asset) model of resiliency through a development-ecological theory. As such, this literature review is presented in six sections. First, the issues facing youth, families, and the communities in which they live are examined. Second, the concept of resiliency is defined. Third, the research related to risk factors or processes is presented in terms of how it relates to resiliency. Fourth, the notion of protective factors or processes or assets is presented with regards to resiliency. Specifically, assets are described through the framework of positive development framework. Fifth, evaluative research will afford an examination of the policies and programs being created to increase the resiliency of youth, families, and the communities in which they live. Thus, this evaluative research will test whether programs or policies that are designed to increase assets (protective factors) and decrease risk factors are effective in improving the lives of youth, families, and the communities in which they live.

Issues facing youth, families, and communities

Youth

The increasing engagement of youth in certain risk behaviors has been linked to social changes that have implications for individual development. Several scholars have noted that youth have no prepared, approved, or appreciated place in society (Furstenberg, 2000; Lerner, 1995). They must tackle, usually on their own, two major tasks: identity formation and the development of self-worth and self-efficacy (Nightingale & Wolverton, 1993; Dryfoos, 1998). For these reasons, youth today are said to be suffering from “rolelessness,” meaning that they do not have contributing, active, productive roles that are consistent with and valued by adult society.

In addition, adolescents are faced with an array of health and social problems in their context that decrease their likelihood of being healthy contributors to our society presently and in the future (Furstenberg, 2000; Hamburg, 1993; Irwin, Brindis, Brodt, Bennett, & Rodriguez, 1991; Lerner, 1995; Takahashi, 1993). These issues suggest that America’s youth are in crisis (Lerner, 1995). Indeed, a very significant proportion of youth--estimates range from 10% to 50%, depending on the particular issues in question--do not manifest healthy developmental changes during this period (Dryfoos, 1990, 1994, 1998; Fuchs & Reklis, 1992; Hamburg, 1992; Huston, 1992; Ketterlinus, Lamb & Nitz, 1994; Lerner, 1993, 1995; National Research Council, 1993; Schorr, 1988).

According to Lerner (1995), “unless dramatic and innovative action is taken soon, millions of our nation’s children and adolescents - the human capital upon which America must build its future - will fall into an abyss of risk, despair, and hopelessness.” Thus, a concerted effort must be made to improve all the contexts that comprise youth development and most especially their families and communities in which they live.

While there has been a fair amount of research done concerning adolescent risk behaviors, few studies have been predicated on an integrated understanding of the developing individual and the multiple contextual relationships that may induce, modify, or maintain these patterns of covariation (Furstenberg, 2000). Such a theoretical presentation would allow greater understanding of the individual and contextual conditions that promote risk and resiliency. Such a theory could lead to policies and programs potentially more sensitive to the diverse individual and contextual conditions involved in risk and resiliency.

Families

As previously noted, the social and economic changes in America have had a tremendous impact on families. For example, the lengthening work week means that most parents are working longer hours and spending less time interacting with their children (Coontz, 2000). Family members are stressed and may not spend any regular, meaningful time together as a group; children increasingly are home alone (Coontz, 2000; Pipher, 1996). For example, the average working couple spends four minutes a day in meaningful conversation with each other, and the average working parent spends thirty seconds a day in meaningful conversation with his or her children (Priority Management Systems, 1989).

These social and economic changes have simultaneously been met with major transformations and stresses of the American Family. A multiplicity of family types and forms have emerged and increased dramatically over the last thirty years (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000). These types include: two-parent families (traditional and blended), one-parent families, co-habiting couples, gay and lesbian families, and extended families. In order to survive, families must be competent and resilient in the face of these changes, as well as the increased number of working hours, the emergence of intergenerational family responsibilities, and other pressures to the family system. Adding the crunch of poverty and the erosion of a safety net to a family already burdened by the above-noted changes increases the likelihood that the family will collapse under the pressure (Seccombe, 2000).

Communities

The loss of fabric that holds communities together has been noted and studied by political scientists, sociologists, human ecologists, and practitioners (Potapchuk, Crocker, Schechter, & Boogard, 1998; Putnam, 2000). The global and social changes noted earlier have been linked to a decrease in community cohesion as well as to lack of parental supervision (Hewlett and West, 1998; Pipher, 1996; Putnam, 2000). Moreover, the crumbling infrastructure of communities is intertwined with the increasing disconnectedness of individuals to one another, their neighborhood, and their community (Pipher, 1996; Putman, 2000).

In order to address this disappearing infrastructure, scholars have begun to conceptualize a healthy or thriving community (Bowen, Martin, Mancini & Nelson, 1999; McKnight, 1997; Potapchuk, Crocker, Schechter, & Boogard, 1998). A healthy or a thriving community is one that fosters support networks/systems and cohesion among its members. These support systems act as protective factors or processes in times of crisis, and act as “assets” in “normal” situations for enhancing the development of individuals, families, and ultimately the strength of the community. However, little knowledge exists on how to create community-wide efforts to strengthen communities on behalf of youth and families.

Resiliency

In the last two decades, developmental psychopathologists and other social scientists have increasingly explored the concept of “invulnerability,” rather than focusing predominantly on vulnerability and maladjustment (Luthar & Zigler, 1991). For example, in the mid 1970s Anthony (1974), a child psychiatrist, introduced the concept of the “psychologically invulnerable child” into the literature of developmental psychopathology to describe children who, despite a history of severe and/or prolonged adversity and psychological stress, manage to achieve emotional health and high competence (Werner & Smith, 1992).

However, Rutter (1985) noted that resistance to stress in children is relative, not absolute. Thus, the ability of an individual to overcome stress is dependent on the level of the stress not exceeding the level of the individual's resiliency characteristics. In addition, the bases of resistance to stress are both environmental and constitutional, and the degree of resistance varies over time according to life circumstances (Rutter, 1985, 1989; Werner & Smith, 1992). The term “invulnerability” may imply an unbreakable individual, one able to conquer any level of stress. Therefore, resilience or stress resistance, rather than invulnerability, is concepts preferred by many researchers (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Rutter 1985; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992) because this term acknowledges a history of success while also implying the possibility of succumbing to future stressors.

Thus, the term resiliency generally refers to those factors and processes that interrupt the trajectory from risk to problem behaviors or psychopathology and thereby result in adaptive outcomes even in the presence of adversity. Simply put, resiliency refers to the ability to spring back from adversity (Garmezy, 1993); it does not mean that one cannot be wounded – as the term invulnerability applies. Garmezy and Masten (1991) define resiliency as “a process of, or capacity for, or the outcome of, successful adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances” (p. 459). Werner (1992) uses the concept to refer to those children who successfully cope with biological and social risk factors. McCubbin and colleagues (1997) apply this definition of resiliency to the elasticity and buoyancy of the family system. According to McCubbin et al. (1997), “Elasticity of family system is the ability of the family to maintain its established patterns of functioning after being challenged and confronted by risk factors. Buoyancy concerns a family’s ability to recover quickly from misfortune, trauma, or transitional event causing or calling for changes in the family’s patterns of functioning” (p 2).

Risks

The possibility for developing knowledge pertinent to prevention or intervention may lie in the risk research which has focused on either: (1) Risk "factors," variables, or processes that seem to be associated with engagement in specific risk behaviors (Dryfoos, 1990, 1998; Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996; Horowitz, 1989; Irwin & Millstein 1986, 1991; Jessor, 1976; Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Jessor, et al., 1995; Udry, 1988); and/or (2) protective factors or processes that are the variables or processes associated with successful development in youth and families (Bernard, 1991, 2004; Dryfoos, 1990; Garmezy, 1985; Garmezy, Masten, & Tellgen, 1984; Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy, & Rutter, 1994; Jessor, 1993; Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Lavery, Siegel, Cousins & Rubovits, 1993; Luster & McAdoo, 1994; McCubbin et al., 1997; Luster & Small, 1994; Luthar, 1991; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Perkins & Borden, 2003; Rak & Patterson, 1996; Rutter, 1985, 1987, 1989; Villarruel, Perkins, Boren, & Keith, 2003; Werner, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992). Indeed, understanding risk and protective factors or processes has direct implications for policy and programs.

Although there are variations in the definition of risk, risk factors or processes, and risk behavior correlates, the research on risk behaviors provides support for the presence of associations among certain individual/familial-organismic, individual/familial-behavioral, and contextual characteristics and adolescents' involvement in risk behaviors or a family’s dysfunctionality. The list of common characteristics has been corroborated by several researchers (Baumrind, 1987; Irwin & Millstein, 1986; Hawkins et al., 1992; Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Jessor, et al., 1995, McCubbin et al., 1997). For example, early initiation or occurrence of any of the risk behaviors is associated with heavy involvement in risk behaviors and more negative consequences from those behaviors. In addition, doing poorly in school and having low expectations of future performance are associated with adolescent problem behaviors. Moreover, low quality neighborhoods are associated with involvement in these risk behaviors. Such neighborhoods are characterized by poverty, violence, urbanization, and high-density conditions. In turn, negative school climate has been found to be positively related to teenage sexual activity, alcohol and/or drug abuse, antisocial behavior and delinquency, and school failure and drop out (Quitten & Rutter, 1988; Small & Luster, 1994).

Positive Development of Youth and Families

In understanding positive youth development, it may be best to examine how positive youth development relates to two common concepts, intervention and prevention. Intervention is defined as discontinuing or stopping an already exhibited problem behavior. For instance, intervention is when an individual goes to the doctor to get medicine to help stop flu from progressing. Prevention, on the other hand, means taking advance measures to keep something (e.g., youth participation in problem behaviors) from happening. An example of this is when a person goes to the doctor and has flu shot, thus building up his or her immune system to prevent him or her from catching the flu. Positive development is a step beyond prevention. Positive development is a process by which youth’s developmental needs are met, engagement in problem behaviors is prevented, and, most importantly, youth are empowered to build the competencies and skills necessary to be healthy contributing citizens now and as adults. In terms of a medical example, positive development means that the individual takes an active role in his/her health by getting an immune shot and by strengthening the body through physically appropriate exercise and dietary actions. In this way, then, youth are producers of their own development (Lerner & Foch, 1987).

Positive youth development means providing youth with the necessary opportunities to acquire a broad range of competencies and a full complement of connections to self, others, and the larger community (Benson, 1997; Lerner, 1995; Perkins et al., 1997; Pittman & Cahill, 1992; Pittman & Zeldin, 1994; Takanishi, 1993). According to the positive youth development philosophy, investments in both human resources and social capital must be made to create opportunities for youth to expand their own capacities as they journey towards adulthood, and to prepare them to be productive citizens in the next millennium.

Moreover, research suggests that there are specific competencies, values, and characteristics found within adolescents and their contexts that safeguard youth from negative consequences, promote success in both developmentally-enhancing- and developmentally-adverse-contexts, and are responsible for adolescent resiliency (Benson, 1990, 1997; Bernard, 1991; Blyth, 1993; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Jessor, 1993; Keith & Perkins, 1995; Luthar, 1991; Rutter 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). These competencies and characteristics are labeled “assets,” (Benson, 1990, 1997; Blyth, 1993) and are viewed as the building blocks of positive youth development (Perkins et al., 1997). These assets may result from “external” factors such as positive relationships in families, friendship groups, schools, and the community, or they may result from “internal” factors reflecting the teenager's personal competencies, values, and attitudes (Benson, 1990, 1997; Blyth, 1993).

For families, McCubbin and his colleagues (1997) have identified several assets in their research on resilient families. First, resilient families that practice problem-solving communication are more likely to overcome adversity. For example, a family system that emphasizes affirmation as its primary pattern of communication increases its potential for recovery from adversity and minimizes the family's risk for dysfunction. Second, resilient families are spiritual and practice their spiritual beliefs. Third, in the face of risk factors and crises, flexibility has been found as an important protective process in the family's efforts to maintain stability. Fourth, resilient families are resourceful and able to find the facts to make logical decisions in crises. Fifth, the family must possess hope that is accompanied by a confident expectation of the fulfillment of their family wishes. Sixth, resilient families establish family practices and routines that maintain stability and continuity in the face of adversity. Seven, resilient families are able to draw on others for social support, which acts as a safety net of caring.

Evaluative Research on Youth Development Programming

Information about risk processes, protective processes, and resiliency obtained from the planned research noted above will be employed to assess strength-based programs targeting high-risk youth, families, and communities. In addition, the information about assets obtained from the research to be conducted will also provide important information for program and policy development. Most information available about how to design and deliver strength-based programs has not been framed within a theoretical and empirical-based foundation (Dryfoos; 1990, 1998; Lerner, 1995, 2004; Pittman, 1995; Schorr, 1988). Thus, as part of the proposed research, strategies (at different levels: individual, familial, and community) and programs that are designed to combat risks and promote positive development of youth and families will be identified, piloted, and evaluated.

Evaluation conducted as a part of this research project will be developmental in nature. Developmental evaluations are an effective vehicle for assessing the complex strategies to be examined (Patton, 1994). This evaluation approach integrates process, formative, and summative strategies in a useful and constructive process. Developmental evaluation is a continuous iterative endeavor that provides regular feedback to empower the project staff to prepare for and adapt to the ever-changing context. Learning takes place from systematically collected information. This will generate continuous learning and quality improvement for strategies designed to enhance the lives of youth, families, and the communities in which they live.

In conclusion, this research will identify the risk processes and protective processes in youth, families and communities that are associated with both maladaptive behaviors and resiliency. In addition, protective processes will be examined in detail to delineate those that are assets for all to those that are specific to certain populations. Finally, evaluative research will be employed to assess the effectiveness of positive development

strategies at the individual, familial, and community level of the ecosystem. This evaluative research will examine these strategies in terms of their influence on decreasing risks while increasing protective processes and/or assets in youth, families, and the communities in which they live. The proposed investigation will also attempt to delineate protective processes that are also assets.

Objectives:

1. To identify and analyze the risk processes, protective processes, and assets at multiple levels of the ecology, as defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979), related to resiliency and maladaptive behaviors in youth, families and communities.
2. To determine the effectiveness and influence of strength-based strategies and programs related to the positive development of youth and families. This includes the identification of dimensions of key developmental processes that occur in these strategies and programs.
 - a. Identify and analyze the relationships between structured out-of-school time experiences and key developmental outcomes of youth, defined as personal engagement in their own development and civic engagement.
 - b. Identify and analyze the relationships between strength-based programs for families and positive outcomes of families, defined by an ability to adapt and thrive.

Procedures:

In order for this project to succeed, multiple procedures are planned. As required, the procedures are presented under each of the project's major objectives. The type of statistics will be determined by the limitations of the data. However, multivariate analysis of this type of data is generally required, using techniques such as: regression, ANOVA, MANOVA, path analysis, and survival analysis.

1. To identify risk processes, protective processes, and assets at multiple levels of the ecology related to both resiliency and maladaptive behaviors in youth, families and communities.

Two strategies will be employed to achieve this objective. First, analysis of already existing databases will be used to examine risk processes, protective processes, maladaptive behaviors, and assets. Survey level data from national sources will be drawn upon for this objective. For example, data will be employed from the National 4-H Study of Youth Development on 15,000 adolescents in the United States. This database provides detailed measurements of youth assets and risk behaviors. In addition, data is being used from several ongoing studies including: Perkins' and Mincemoyer's 4-H Study of Life Skills; and Life Skills Instrumentation Study for Youth (ages 8-12).

The second strategy to be employed to examine risk processes, protective processes, maladaptive behaviors, and assets will involve the collection of new data. This data will utilize various data collection methods including: ethnographic and observational methods (Berg, 1989), mapping (Larson & Richards, 1994; Lauffer 1982; Trochim 1989); self-report questionnaires (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Kerlinger, 1986;), standardized measures, focus groups (Kruger, 1994), interviews (Cook & Campbell, 1979), and archival data (Singleton, Straits, Straits, & McAllister, 1988). Information gathered from these methods will be qualitative and quantitative. The target population for this data collection is youth and families that are living in disadvantaged or poverty-stricken urban and rural areas.

2. To determine the effectiveness and influence of strength- based strategies and programs related to the positive development of youth and families.

In order to address this objective, the project will employ two strategies. First, existing evaluations of prevention and positive development programs currently being conducted will continue to be under this objective, such as: Youth Engaged in Technology (CYFAR project); Evaluation Study of the Fork in the Road program; and PROMoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience (PROSPER).

Second, investigations will be sought to examine the influence of positive youth development programs, family strengths programs, and community mobilization initiatives. This includes evaluating educational programs designed to increase the success of youth and families in high-risk environments. Innovative strength-based strategies within extension (i.e., 4-H/Youth Development and Family Consumer Sciences) programs as well as other community agency programs will be developed, piloted, and evaluated as part of this research project. In addition, skill and competency-based program evaluations will be conducted regardless of risk level to provide information about building assets in all youth and families. Finally, evaluations will be conducted on community-wide initiatives that are designed to address social problems and/or build a community's competency and capacity for positive development of youth and families.

The research design for studies will vary depending on the timing of the research and the program's phase. Evaluations planned and initiated at the start of a program or initiative will be experimental whenever possible. If not possible, then a quasi-experimental design will be utilized (e.g., matched comparison group). The types of statistics to be employed will be multivariate and include: OLS or logistic regression, ANOVA, MANOVA, and path analysis (e.g., structural equation modeling).

2a. Identify and analyze the relationships between structured out-of-school time experiences and key developmental outcomes of youth, defined as personal engagement in their own development and civic engagement.

This objective is being addressed by Dr. Perkins with an evaluation project of an after school program in Clearfield County. The strategy to address this objective involves the collection of a process and outcome data. The methods used to collect this data will include time use ethnographic and observational methods in the settings where structured out-of-school experiences occur, focus groups, interviews with key informants, paper and pencil survey self-reports by youth and their parents, archival data from individual records from youth serving organizations related to levels of youth participation in structured out-of-school activities, and archival data related to community characteristics. In addition, survey and self-reports are being collected from parents, and archival data will be collected from student school records.

2b. Identify and analyze the relationships between strength-based programs for families and positive outcomes of families, defined by an ability to adapt and thrive.

Family and Consumer Sciences educators and 4-H Youth Development educators of Penn State Cooperative Extension will collaborate in the development and piloting of strength-based strategies and programs or in the implementation of already developed programs. A purposeful sample of strength-based strategies or programs that include low- to high-risk families will be drawn. The methods used to collect this data will be those noted in 2a. In particular, we will use ethnographic and observational methods in the settings where programs occur and in familial settings themselves, focus groups, interviews with key informants, paper and pencil survey self-reports by participants, and standardized measures of family functioning.

Stakeholder Engagement:

The stakeholders are engaged in the qualitative data collection as they are the one who are interviewed and observed. Currently, no stakeholders are assisting in the actual conducting of the research.

Scope of Impact:

This research project has implications and impacts for various levels including: state specific, integrated research and extension, and multistate integrated extension and research (e.g., PROSPER – Iowa State).

Integrated Activities:

The positive development promotional strategies and interventions being examined within this research project directly inform practitioners (Youth Development and Family and Consumer Science practitioners). In addition, identified problems and issues in practice are shared by practitioners through in-services and county visits.

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