

Mentoring and Positive Youth Development: Theory, Method, and Doing Research that Matters

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Key Themes of this Presentation

- **A new, positive vision of young people has been legitimated by developmental science: This is the Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective**
- **This vision is derived from six decades of biological, psychological, and social research, from studies that indicate that all young people have strengths**
- **This research indicates also that we can capitalize on the strengths of youth by aligning adolescents with the resources that exist -- in families, schools, and communities -- for promoting positive development. These resources may be termed developmental assets**
- **In all contexts – family, school, and community – people are the most important, the most influential, assets**

Key Themes of this Presentation: Continued

- Through the scientific development, evaluation, and refinement of the *quality* of mentoring programs we can assure that in every community the human resources that youth need for their positive development are available
- The research we conduct needs to be theoretically predicated and methodologically diverse. There is no one method for documenting what works or for determining what constitutes quality mentoring
- By conducting and disseminating research that is sensitive to the diversity of the youth we seek to enhance, we can be optimistic that we can promote PYD; further social justice; and enhance democracy for this and future generations

KEY FINDINGS IN ADOLESCENT RESEARCH: THERE ARE DIVERSE PATHWAYS

- **Although scientists and the public have believed (for about 100 years!) that adolescent development is characterized universally by “storm and stress,” most young people do NOT have a stormy second decade of life**
- **Although adolescents spend increasingly more time with peers than with parents, most adolescents still value their relations with parents enormously**
- **Most adolescents have core values (e.g., about the importance of education in one’s life, about social justice, and even about spirituality) that are consistent with those of their parents**
- **Most adolescents select friends who share these core values**

RESEARCH VERSUS THE REALITIES OF CONTEMPORARY ADOLESCENTS

- **Yet, until the 1990s, most research continued to use the “storm and stress,” deficit model to study adolescence**
- **Literally hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each year to reduce the problems “caused” by the alleged deficits (the purported inevitable “storm and stress”) of adolescents**
- **Nevertheless, problems continue to exist!**
- **These problems include alcohol use and abuse; unsafe sex and teenage pregnancy; school failure and drop out; crime and delinquency; and depression and self-harming behaviors**

40.3 Million Youth

Between

the Ages of

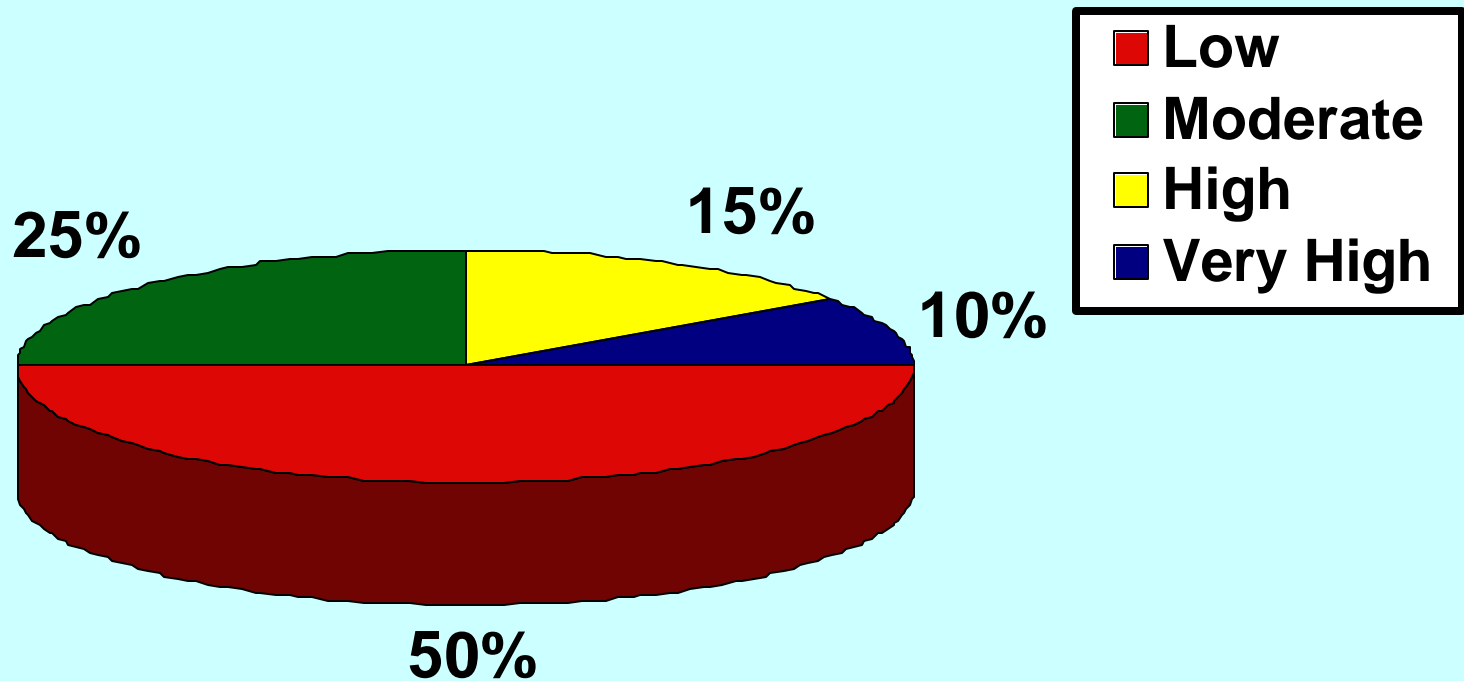
10 and 19 Years

Source: Yax, L.K. U.S. Census Bureau, 2003.

Major Categories of Youth Risk Behaviors:

- **Unsafe sex, teenage pregnancy, and teenage parenting**
- **School failure, underachievement, and dropout**
- **Delinquency, crime, and violence**
- **Drug and alcohol use and abuse**

Percent of Youth Population According to Risk Status



Adapted from Dryfoos, 1990

THE EMERGENCE OF THE PYD PERSPECTIVE

- In the face of these persistent problems, many scientists and practitioners aligned to seek a new vision for research about, and applications for, youth
- In the 1990s this new vision began to emerge
- Termed the "positive youth development" (PYD) perspective, this conception is derived from the biological, comparative, and psychological study of development
- Biological, including genetic, research indicates that there exists a great potential for systematic change in human behavior across the life span
- This potential for systematic change is termed "plasticity."
- Plasticity occurs through the mutually influential relations people have with their contexts (families, schools, etc.); these relations may be represented as individual \leftrightarrow context.

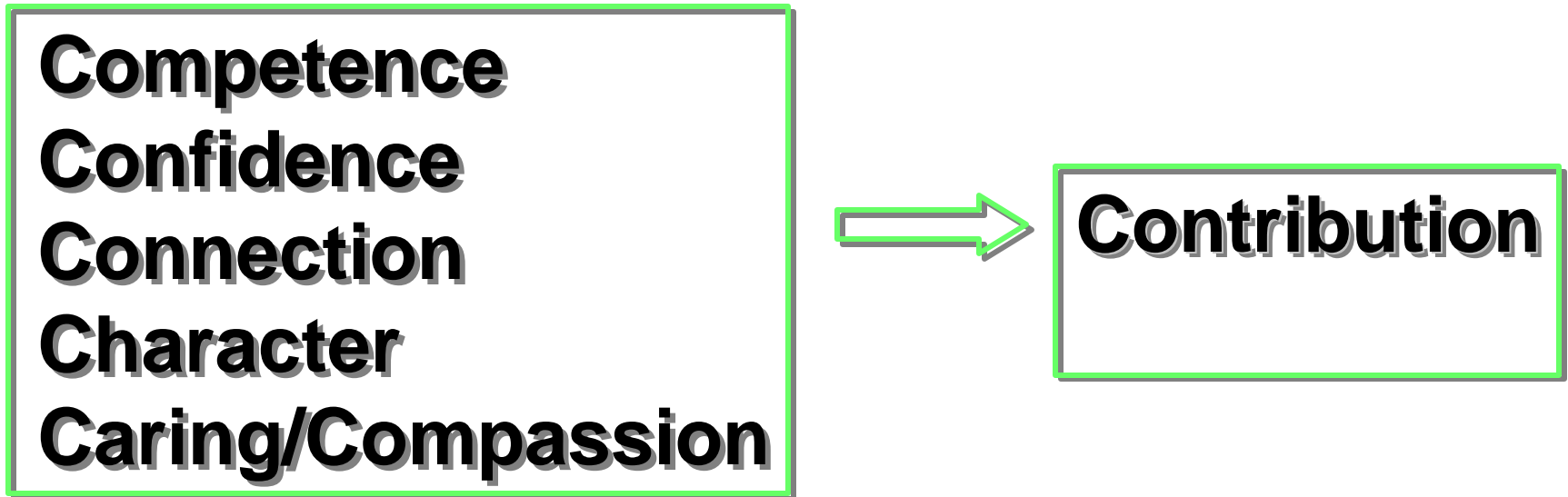
IMPLICATIONS OF PLASTICITY FOR ADOLESCENCE: Continued

- Problems represent only a small proportion of the range of behaviors that are possible to see among young people
- Because of plasticity, there are then no necessary or inevitable deficits in adolescence
- There is always some chance to eliminate or prevent problems
- There is always an opportunity to promote positive development among youth by changing youth \leftrightarrow context relations

THE POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

- 1. Because of the potential to change, all youth have strengths**
- 2. All contexts have strengths as well. These strengths are resources that may be used to promote positive youth development**
- 3. These resources are termed “developmental assets:” They are the “social nutrients” needed for healthy development**
- 4. These assets are found in families, schools, faith institutions, youth serving organizations, and the community more generally**
- 5. If the strengths of youth are combined with ecological developmental assets, then positive, healthy development may occur**
- 6. We may be optimistic that it is in our power to promote positive development among all youth**

Attributes of Positive Youth Development:



**Youth are resources to be
developed,
not problems to be managed**

Roth & Brooks-Gunn (2003)

How Can Positive Youth Development Be Promoted?

Characteristics of Effective Youth Development Programs

Programs That Are Effective In Promoting Positive Youth Development:

THE BIG THREE

- 1. Promote caring adult-youth relations.**
- 2. Emphasize the development of life skills.**
- 3. Promote youth participation in, and leadership of, every facet of the program.**

**Effective Youth Programs
Inculcate in Youth the Personal
("Internal") Resources, and
Provide Them with the Community
('External") Supports,
Requisite for Positive Development:**

**These are the
"Developmental Assets"
for Positive Youth Development**

The Search Institute (SI) Categories of 40 Developmental Assets

External

- **Support**
- **Empowerment**
- **Boundaries and expectations**
- **Constructive use of time**

Internal

- **Commitment to learning**
- **Positive values**
- **Social competencies**
- **Positive identity**

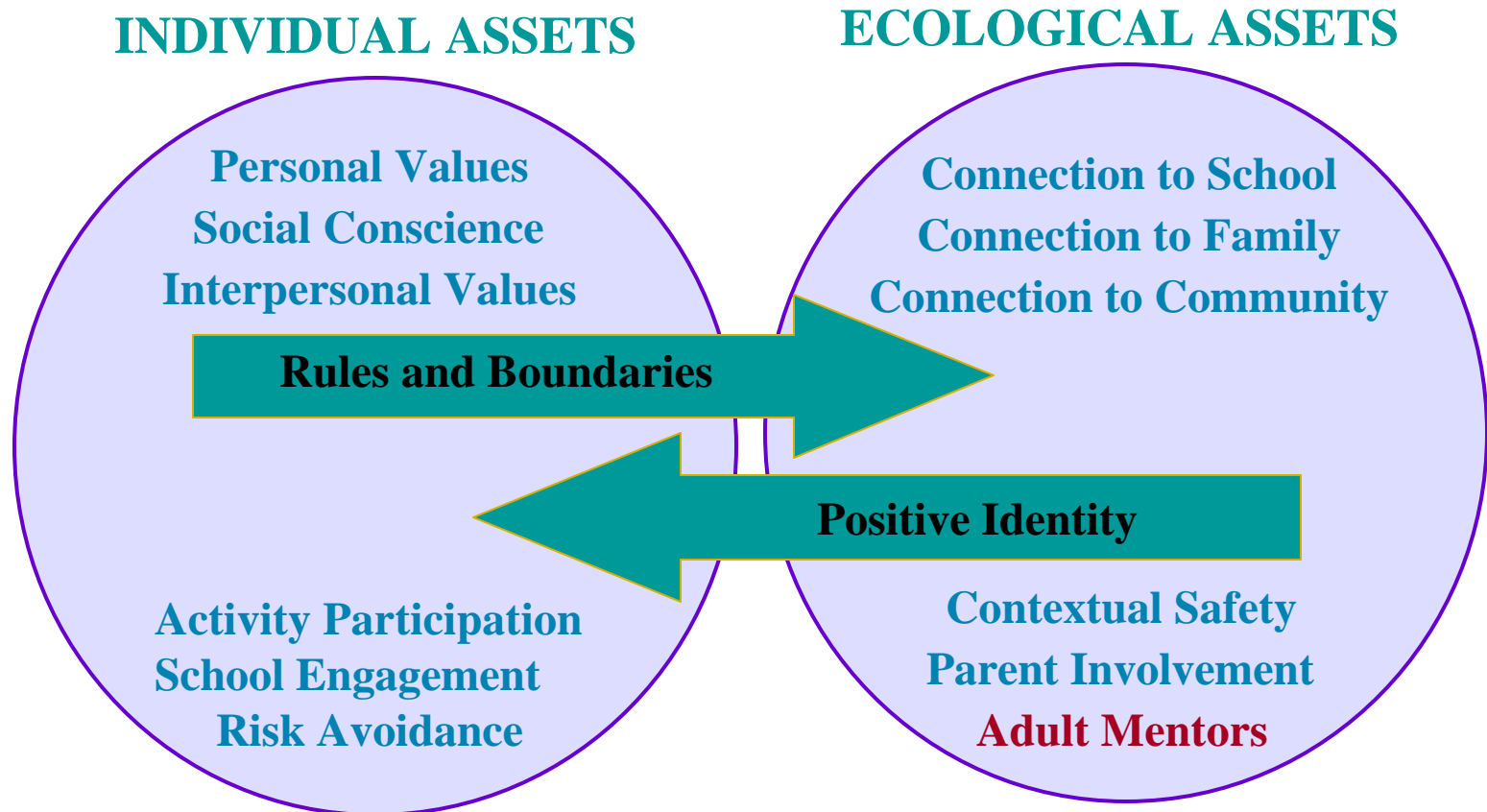
Findings from SI about Developmental Assets

- More is better
- Assets associated with decreases in risks/problem behaviors
- Assets associated with indicators of PYD or thriving

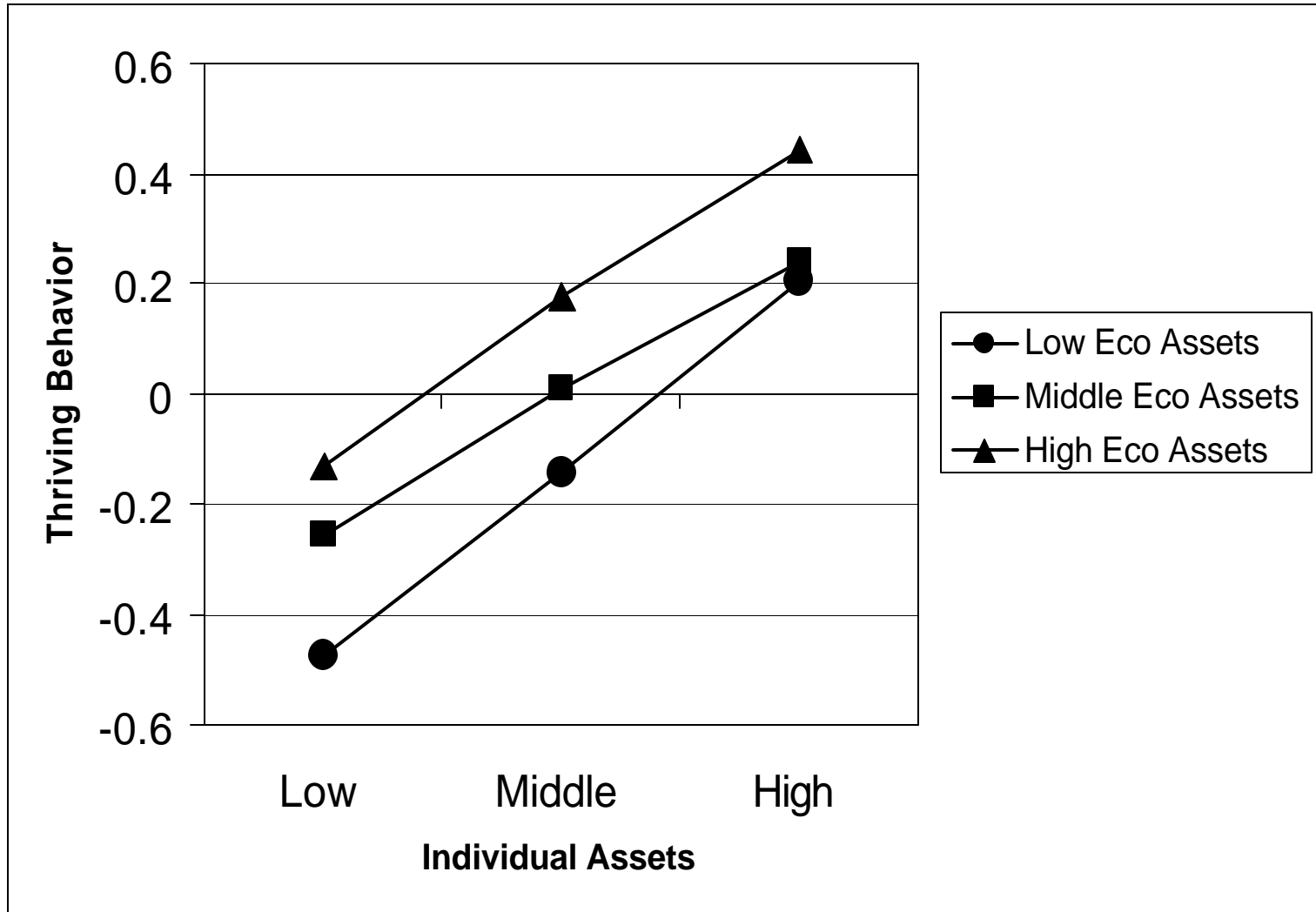
Limitations of the SI approach to Developmental Assets

- Developmental assets and thriving are based on youth self-reports.
- Several of the assets seem to be very similar
- Questions may be raised about:
 - **Are there really 40 assets?**
 - **Do youth perceptions of assets correspond to actual assets?**

Relationship Between Individual and Ecological Assets (Theokas, et al., 2005)



Relationship between Levels of Individual and Ecological Assets and the Thriving Behaviors Composite Score (Theokas, et al., 2005)



ASSESSING THE ROLE OF ACTUAL ECOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS FOR PYD: HOMES, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES

- **Human Resources: Strengths, skills, talents and roles of individuals available to youth**
 - For example, the presence in the community of adults who are educated, employed, or trained to work with youth
- **Physical/Institutional Resources: Opportunities for learning, recreation, and engagement with others and the physical world**
 - For example, presence of after school programs, youth facilities, fields, playgrounds, libraries

Based on Theokas & Lerner (2006)

ASSESSING THE ROLE OF ACTUAL ECOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS FOR PYD: HOMES, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES

- **Collective Activity**: Engagement between community members, youth, and institutions of society
 - For example, number of nights a family has dinner together, parent participation at school events, or youth-adult engagement in neighborhood group, civic organization, or governmental body
- **Accessibility**: Ability of youth to partake of resources (e.g., safety, hours of operation)
 - Number of adults in the home, student : teacher ratio, neighborhood stability and safety

Based on Theokas & Lerner (2006)

ACTUAL ECOLOGICAL ASSETS AND PYD: RESULTS

- Family assets accounted for largest portions of the variance for all outcomes, with the exception of Contribution, for which school assets accounted for more variance
- However, within each context, PEOPLE always had the greatest effect on developmental outcomes:
 - Collective Activity in the Family (eating dinner together)
 - Accessibility in School (small school size and teacher: student ratios)
 - Presence of Adult Role Models in the Community (Mentors)

Based on Theokas & Lerner (2006)

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- **Research should be disseminated to policy makers and practitioners in ways that are understandable and usable to them**
- **Such research (e.g., from the labs of Eccles, Brooks-Gunn, Mahoney, and Larson, as well as from my own lab) documents the important role in promoting PYD of after-school experiences with competent, committed, caring, and consistently present adults**
- **HOWEVER, this research has features that may be seen as positive or as negative, depending on one's scientific perspective**

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE: Continued

POSITIVE

- **The findings documenting the fundamental links between PYD and mentoring come from theoretically-predicated research about the individual \leftrightarrow context relations integral in human development**
- **Theory-based research is the sine qua non of developmental science. “A collection of facts no more makes a science than a pile of bricks makes a house” (von Bertalanffy, 1933). Theory is needed to provide coherence and meaning to scholarship about young people**

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE: Continued

(Allegedly) Negative

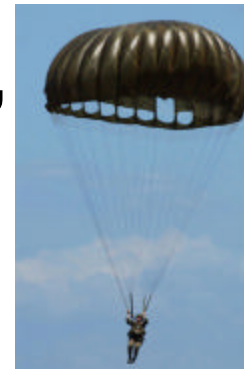
- **This research is derived from longitudinal research, studies that control by systematic variation, and not by systematic equation, as in randomized control trials (RCTs)**
- **Longitudinal research also often triangulates between quantitative measures and (shudder!) qualitative assessments**

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE: Continued

- **Many people believe that such research cannot be used to understand basic processes of development**
- **Thankfully, fewer and fewer people within developmental science believe this (e.g., see the recent Handbook of Child Psychology Damon & Lerner, 2006; and the Handbook of Adolescent Psychology; Lerner & Steinberg, 2004).**
- **But, there are still relatively significant proportions of people within the policy and funding communities with this view**
- **As a consequence, data from longitudinal research are often excluded from consideration in the formulation of indicators of PYD, youth policy, applications to program design**

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE: Continued

- **In decision making, there is often a contradiction between the professional and personal uses made of research**
- **The example of Authoritative Parenting**
- **The “Parachute Parable”**



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE: Continued

- We need to avoid “mindless methodologism”
- As always the case in good science, all facets of methodology should be based on the (theoretically-predicated) questions asked. Theory should determine methods!
- All too often, and arguably especially in RCT research, there is an absence of strong developmental theory in the framing of the research
- Allegiance to one method should not determine or foreclose on the questions we ask
- As also always in good science, we need to understand that all methods have both assets and limitations – included the ill-named gold standard RCT
- It is critical to always triangulate across methods to separate “true” variance from “method” variance

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE: Continued

- **Eschewing “mindless methodologism” means that qualitative research is legitimated as an integral arrow in the methodological quiver of developmental science**
- **An important feature of our scholarship and its applied use is learning about the nature of development as valued by the users of our science**
- **Peter Jensen, formerly the head of intramural research at NIMH and now an endowed professor at Columbia P & S, has termed such scholarship “outreach research”**
- **It is critical that we conduct outreach research to learn not only what can work (e.g., through an RCT) but what is palatable, feasible, durable, affordable, and sustainable in communities – and therefore what does work!**

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE: Continued

- **By understanding the qualities of life that young people and their mentors believe matter;**
- **By triangulating such assessments with knowledge gained through many different types of observational methods and research designs; and**
- **By thereby gaining a rich understanding of the youth ↔ mentor relations that reflect the basic, relational process of adolescent development,**
- **We can conduct scholarship that will matter in deep, valued, and important ways to the diverse young people of our nation**
- **With such research as the basis of our policies and program we in turn can take actions that matter for promoting positive development and, as such, for enhancing social justice and civil society in our democracy.**

Projected Impact of the PYD Perspective



ANSWERING THE “REALLY BIG” QUESTION:

- **What actions (e.g., actions predicated on the “Big Three”), of what duration, with what youth, in what communities, at what points in ontogenetic and historical time, will result in what features of positive youth development and in what contributions to self, family, community, and civil society?**

Or, more simply:

- **How do we foster mutually beneficial relations between healthy youth and a nation marked by social justice, democracy, and liberty?**