

**Youth violence and positive psychology:  
Research potential through integration**

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### Abstract

Positive psychologists can study the relation between some of the discipline's core dimensions and aversive outcomes including youth violence. Dimensions such as gratitude, forgiveness, sense of meaning, altruism (or at least apparent altruism), prudence, and humility have received attention within positive psychology, and evidence is reviewed suggesting that these may also deserve empirical attention in terms of their relation to youth violence and even their potential to reduce youth violence.

### **Youth violence and positive psychology: Research potential through integration**

Positive psychology as a field of study has shown remarkable growth over the last 15 years. The field now has its own journal (*Journal of Positive Psychology*), graduate programs (e.g., University of Pennsylvania, University of East London, Claremont Graduate University), dedicated scholarships and research grants, international conferences each year, researchers from Europe, the U.S., and other regions, and wide sales for some of its textbooks (e.g., Peterson, 2006; Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

One topic receiving little if any attention within this growing field is the application of positive psychology to research on youth violence. However, a positive psychology approach to youth violence research may not only be possible, but beneficial. We will argue for research explicitly linking some core constructs from positive psychology with research on youth violence. These constructs may reduce or at least predict reduced levels of youth violence. Admittedly, positive psychology and youth violence research may initially seem incompatible. Definitions of positive psychology tend to focus on the scientific study of positive traits and well-being (and sometimes positive institutions; e.g., Seligman, 2002). This definitional focus may seem to exclude a focus on youth violence.

#### **Bringing Balance to Positive Psychology by Studying Aversive Outcomes**

However, applying positive psychology to youth violence research may help bring balance to positive psychology. A persuasive case has been made by Wong (2009, in press) that more balance is needed in positive psychology. In particular, he argued that positive psychology focuses on the human appetitive system. In other words, the discipline tends to focus on goals that motivate approach, goals such as happiness and character strengths. These foci, of course, have value. However, Wong has argued that a balanced approach must also integrate the aversive system that helps people avoid or cope well with undesirable outcomes. Well-being requires not only approaching positive goals, but also avoiding negative outcomes or at least dealing well with negative outcomes.

An exclusive focus on strengths and positive emotions ignores significant parts of human life. All humans must not only approach appetitive outcomes, but also avoid aversive outcomes. Building a sustainable future for individuals (O'Brien, 2008) requires not only building the good, but also avoiding the bad. In a sense, the tendency to ignore human tragedy and pain within positive psychology is surprising given the fact that resilience research (which presupposes the existence of tragedy that must be overcome) has been accepted by some to be within the domain of positive psychology (e.g., Yates & Masten, 2004). Furthermore, if positive psychology studies only appetitive constructs, the discipline may over-represent concerns and causal agents especially relevant for the societal elites and ignore the social issues and barriers to the good life that are more common among the non-elite (e.g., poverty, hunger, violence; Wong, 2007). Thus, a balanced positive psychology will seek to promote strengths and happiness while simultaneously reducing aversive outcomes.

Youth violence is clearly an undesirable outcome. As such, it has been largely ignored within positive psychology. Some evidence will be discussed, however, suggesting that the positive psychology approach to studying human strengths may deserve to be extended to research on youth violence. Admittedly, some violence researchers have begun to study protective factors which could be considered human strengths (e.g., Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2003), however explicitly linking positive psychology and youth violence will encourage study

of some strength variables largely ignored in the violence literature. Thus, positive psychology may have high relevance for research on factors that may inhibit youth violence.

### **Further Pragmatic and Theoretical Justifications**

Some people could argue that aversive outcomes such as youth violence are justifiably largely ignored within positive psychology research. They could argue that the definition of positive psychology is antithetic to the study of youth violence and other societal problems that induce human pain and tragedy. Admittedly, the link between positive psychology and youth violence research might seem tenuous at first. We have discussed the potential of this link to contribute to balance in positive psychology. However, other reasons can also justify a link. Initially, for us, pragmatic considerations helped prompt our efforts to link youth violence and positive psychology. In a series of community consultations on youth violence, community leaders welcomed research that could help reduce youth violence. However, a number of these same leaders told us that they were fatigued by and would not support research drawing attention to problems in the region or in an ethnic group even if these efforts were well intentioned (e.g., Group of 10, 2005). Thus, they wanted research that could help reduce youth violence, but that would not focus on problems. Such a challenge may seem impossible—researching strategies for reducing violence without focusing on problems among youth or the community as a whole. We proposed a positive psychology perspective on youth violence. In particular, we proposed studying potentially modifiable strengths that protect kids from becoming involved in violence. We are now exploring potentially modifiable external (social) strengths, internal (character) strengths, and cognitive strengths (reasons not to commit crimes) as factors that may protect youth from involvement in violence. School systems that might resist research on pathology have expressed openness to studies of strengths. Also, service providers are excited to join in with programs that primarily build strengths rather than ameliorate pathology.

Theoretical reasons also justify a focus on youth violence and positive psychology. The positive psychology perspective is unusual in this domain, and as a result may generate theoretically novel ideas. Many forensic psychologists and criminologists have studied the criminal act and factors contributing to the criminal act. Far fewer have examined factors keeping youth out of crime and even fewer have focused on factors particularly interesting to positive psychologists, factors such as gratitude, altruism, and forgiveness that have attracted much interest in positive psychology. Few if any, for example, have explored positive psychology interventions (e.g., gratitude interventions) as strategies for keeping kids away from violence. Just as positive psychology has generated novel approaches to treating depression (e.g., Sin & Lyubomirsky; 2009), likewise a positive psychology orientation may generate novel and possibly practical strategies for reducing youth violence. Thus, we are focusing on potentially modifiable strengths that protect youth from involvement in violence.

A goal frustration perspective provides further support for the relevance of positive psychology to research on factors reducing youth violence. At least some youth violence may result from a frustration of basic needs for success and fulfillment. Frustration may be exacerbated by the youth accepting societally valued goals including materialism, fame, and good looks. These goals are often unfulfilled and unfulfilling (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Furthermore, frustration of goals and needs can lead to violence as an alternative strategy for meeting one's psychological needs. In fact, a tendency towards violence following goal frustration seems to be a biologically wired response (Wong, 1994). However, finding alternative goals can preclude or at least abbreviate this inclination towards violence (Wong, 1994). Positive psychology, with its emphasis on building human strengths can provide youth

with achievable goals to replace goals such as wealth, fame, and attractiveness that are widely valued (Kasser & Ryan, 1996), but often difficult to achieve. Thus, some of these strength constructs studied within positive psychology deserve attention as factors that may reduce youth violence.

An alternative to a positive psychology orientation would be pathology-focused research and intervention. This alternative would identify and treat pathologies that contribute to violence. Such an approach will, of course, continue to have relevance in many contexts, but pathology-focused interventions have disadvantages. First, community members will tire of hearing about problems in their community. Second, youth at risk may resist involvement in programs drawing attention to their pathologies. Third, many deficit based programs exist already. Thus, in our current context, the study of modifiable protective strengths makes sense and may deserve attention much more broadly.

To our knowledge, little if any published research applies positive psychology to youth violence. Admittedly, resilience researchers have drawn attention to social assets and some internal assets such as sense of control. Also, there have been movements in related fields of forensic psychology and mental health to include protective factors in violence risk assessment and management approaches. For example, several violence risk assessment and management instruments require evaluators to make structured ratings of protective factors (Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth [SAVRY; Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2003]; Short-term Assessment of Risk and Treatability [START; Webster, Martin, Brink, Nicholls, & Middleton, 2004]; Structured Assessment of Protective Factors [SAPROF; de Vogel, de Ruiter, Bouman, & de Vries, 2009]). Early evaluations indicate that higher scores on protective factors on these instruments are associated with lower levels of violence (Borum, Lodewijks, Bartel, & Forth, 2010; de Vries, de Vogel, & de Spa, 2008; Desmarais, Wilson, Nicholls, & Brink, 2010; Wilson, Desmarais, Nicholls, & Brink, under review). Thus, rather than focusing on strengths, we could have chosen to focus on one of these related constructs such as protective factors or resilience assets (Gilgun, Klein, & Pranis, 2000; Perkins & Borden, 2003). One reason we have chosen the term “strengths,” rather than some of the alternatives, is because it does not logically imply that the factor is only relevant in the face of adversity (as the terms “protective” and “resiliency” could). Furthermore, the term “strength” comes out of the positive psychology tradition and within that research stream has come to include an emphasis on traditional virtues that are often ignored in other examinations of protective factors (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Even those who study protective factors tend to give limited attention to some traditionally valued virtues that have received attention in positive psychology. One of the advances of positive psychology has been to draw attention to the research potential of some previously neglected traditionally valued virtues. These constructs may also be relevant in public health type interventions to reduce violence.

### **Exemplars Linking Positive Psychology and Human Difficulties**

Thus, positive psychology need not exclude the application of positive psychology to research on aversive outcomes. In particular, positive psychology research can examine how its core components (strengths, well-being, and positive institutions) relate to particular hardships, tragedies, and societal problems.

We are not completely alone in applying positive psychology constructs to the study of aversive contexts and outcomes. David Evans, for example, explored positive psychology topics for much of his career, even though positive psychology as a field had yet to be formally recognized during much of that time. Some of Evans' early work focused on prototypical

positive psychology such as his development of a quality of life scale (1985). Later, however, he expanded his work to examine people in the midst of difficult circumstances. For example, he studied well-being among people with leukemia (Evans, Thompson, Browne, Barr, & Burton, 1993), among Salvadoran refugees (Young & Evans, 1997), and among people facing other stressors including retirement (Gall & Evans, 2000) and transition from high school to university (Gall, Evans, & Bellerose, 2000).

Likewise, Chris Davis has combined positive psychology with a focus on people in the midst of distress. He studied meaning-making, a topic of interest to positive psychologists (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2009), but did so among people who experienced stressful and potentially pathology inducing circumstances. He also examined positive life-change following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks (Davis & MacDonald, 2004) and among people experiencing tinnitus (Davis & Morgan, 2008).

Lyubomirsky has also applied positive psychology to people experiencing pathology. Her major focus has been factors promoting happiness—clearly within the domain of positive psychology. However, she has recently collaborated on a meta-analysis (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009) providing evidence that some happiness inducing interventions are also potent for reducing depression. Thus, she is applying the findings of positive psychology to a particular aversive outcome.

The value of applying positive psychology to reduction of aversive outcomes is highlighted by Huppert's (2004, 2009) argument for a population health approach to positive psychology. Research within the population health perspective suggests that relatively small, but population wide, improvements in health behavior can greatly reduce pathology prevalence. For example, small, but population wide increases in physical activity can significantly reduce the frequency of heart disease. Likewise, small, but population wide increases in behavior promoting well-being (e.g., practices promoting gratitude, life-purpose, and altruism) could potentially reduce the frequency of pathological outcomes for people facing life stressors (Tweed & Conway, 2009). For this effect to occur, the changes must permeate a population or at least subgroups at risk of pathology.

Positive psychology that engages with aversive outcomes can provide two major benefits. First, a positive psychology that engages with aversive outcomes may provide a *path from aversive outcome to a form of well-being* that does not deny tragedy (Wong, 2007). As Wong (2007) has argued, positive psychology will be “guilty of elitism if it is only relevant to those who are privileged to live a life of peace and prosperity.” Second, a positive psychology that engages with societal aversive outcomes may provide a *path avoiding aversive outcomes* (Seligman, 1996).

### **Relevance of Youth Violence**

Our focus is youth violence. The topic has social relevance. Some of the impacts of youth violence are obvious such as the physical harm to both the victim and sometimes to the offender. However, youth violence seems to cause more than mere physical harm and the effects extend beyond the victims and victimizers. Those living in threatening environments at school, at home, or in the neighborhood have an increased incidence of depression (Fitzpatrick, Piko, Wright, & LaGory, 2005). Children, in particular, who witness violence, are at risk not only of symptoms of distress, but also of acting out in violence themselves (Farver, Xu, Eppe, Fernandez, & Schwartz; 2005). Furthermore, youth violence is sometimes spurred by gang involvement. Gang membership is associated with violence and violent offending both cross-sectionally and longitudinally (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Esbensen &

Huizinga, 1993; Gordon, Lahey, Kawai, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Farrington, 2004; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierscheme, 1993). Also, involvement in gangs seems to promote further violence; youth who move in and out of gangs are more violent during their time associated with the gang (Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2005; Thornberry et al., 1993). While there are only approximate statistics on the number of gangs in Canada, results from the Canadian Police Survey (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003) identified 434 youth gangs in Canada with approximately 7000 members nationwide. Such gangs are often involved in the drug trade (RCMP, 2006; Tanner & Wortly, 2004), substance use (Gatti et al., 2005; Tanner & Wortley, 2004), adult criminal organizations (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003), and serious weapons offenses (Mellor, Macrae, Pauls, & Hornick, 2005; RCMP, 2006).

### **Which Strength Variables Deserve Further Research?**

A broad set of human strengths have been of interest within positive psychology. In keeping with that characteristic of positive psychology, this review also covers a broad set of strengths that may deserve attention by youth violence researchers, however, this review will focus mainly on strengths that have received significant attention within positive psychology. The strengths that matter could be organized in a number of ways. We divide them into external (social) strengths, and internal strengths of character and virtue, and internal strengths of belief (reasons not to commit crimes).

#### ***External (Social) Strengths***

Our attention to external (social) strengths is probably the least innovative aspect of our approach so will not be developed extensively here. This work is foreshadowed by the resilience research tradition. Many researchers within this tradition and from a variety of disciplines have focused on assets, often social assets, promoting positive development among youth. The resilience tradition examines successful adaptation in difficult circumstances and has spurred empirically based lists of social assets such as stable families, safe communities, and connections to prosocial organizations that promote resilience (e.g., Yates & Masten, 2004).

Within this tradition, social relations have received much attention. Relations that especially matter include those with community members, household members, peers, and school personnel (Hanson & Kin, 2007). Ideally, these relations will be caring, will place high expectations on the youth, and will provide meaningful participation in the world beyond the self. Youth with relations of this type have more positive outcomes (e.g., higher grades) and reduced delinquency and violence (Hanson & Kin, 2007; Herrenkohl, Hill, Chung, Guo, Abbott, & Hawkins, 2003; Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004). The Search Institute's 40 asset model is the most widely known model integrating assets (Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Drake, & Blyth, 1998). That work is based on a model of 40 assets that youth should possess. These include assets such as family support, parental school involvement, and clear rules at school. Some research suggests that a greater number of assets is associated with a host of positive outcomes including higher grades, less delinquency, and less violence (Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Drake, & Blyth, 1998).

The Search Institute 40 assets model has much value. The Search Institute model has been successful in capturing public interest in asset based interventions. However, the scoring system of the 40 assets is proprietary, so most independent observers cannot assess the psychometric structure of the measure. In our experience, users of the 40 asset measure are allowed to collect data, turn the raw data in to the company, and receive back scores for the assets, but are not allowed to know how the data were transformed into scores. Furthermore, the validity data available for the 40 asset model seem to be mainly based on a sum of 40 asset

scores. This type of data provides no information on the relation between individual assets and outcome (e.g., Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Drake, & Blyth, 1998). As a result, the model is more helpful for determining whether assets matter and for spurring community action, than for determining which assets matter.

The Search Institute now markets a measure assessing fewer assets and providing a more open scoring process. This type of measure may be especially valuable in clarifying dimensions that matter most. Likewise, the makers of the Healthy Kids Survey have revealed an abundance of data on predictive validity, structural validity and also validity problems with the model underlying their measure (Hanson & Kin, 2007; see also Unger, 2006 for a device constructed in Canada). More research is needed with devices for which full psychometric information is liberally provided.

### ***Internal Strengths: Character Strengths and Virtues***

One of the more distinctive characteristics of positive psychology is the attention devoted to character strengths and virtues (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The two terms are often used interchangeably within positive psychology and within the current discussion. B.F. Skinner (1971) tried to eradicate discussion of virtue from the realm of psychology. In part, his bias against discussion of virtue was justified; he feared that people would assume virtues to be stable trait-like characteristics that determine behavior. In contrast, empirical research suggests that situations strongly influence behavior, even behavior of people who seem to possess particular virtues (e.g., Darley & Batson, 1973). Thus virtues will not be perfectly stable and relations between virtues and behavior will be moderated by situational context. Nonetheless, characters strengths and virtues have been attracting interest among positive psychologists.

Seligman and Peterson (2004) have developed a taxonomy of 24 character strengths and virtues that is frequently utilized within positive psychology. One could argue that their taxonomy is the default list of character strengths commonly studied within positive psychology. Most of the character strengths upon which we focus are drawn from Peterson and Seligman's (2004) taxonomy. When Peterson and Seligman developed their taxonomy, they chose to focus on constructs that could be measured, that are valued in many cultures, and that do not diminish other people (e.g., "striving to win" implies diminishing the status of others, so could be deleted from their list). The strengths include leadership, humility, gratitude, forgiveness and a number of other constructs. Self reports assessing these strengths have been developed and are available for personal use at [www.viastrengths.org](http://www.viastrengths.org).

There is evidence that youth violence researchers should also pay attention to these types of character strengths and virtues. Some of these may be incompatible with violence or at least produce behavior that can displace violent behavior. If so, then, taking a public health perspective is appropriate (Huppert, 2009). Population interventions that create even small increases in relevant character strengths could potentially reduce incidences of youth violence. Some of the relevant character strengths will be reviewed here.

Some internal strengths relevant to youth violence have already been explored by resilience researchers and include constructs such as self-efficacy and self-awareness (Hanson & Kin, 2007; see also Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Drake, & Blyth, 1998). Positive psychology, however, is somewhat unique in its devotion to studying a broad set of character strengths and in focusing mainly on traits that have traditionally been considered to be virtues.

Each strength discussed here has either received significant attention within positive psychology or is clearly within the classification of traditionally being considered a virtue. Furthermore, each strength has potential relevance within research on factors that may protect

against or at least predict reduced levels of youth violence.

**Forgiveness.** Forgiveness has received attention within positive psychology (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Also, forgiveness may have relevance for youth violence research. Tendency to forgive has shown strong negative relations with aggression; also, forgiveness is negatively associated with vengeful rumination (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, Wade, 2005). Furthermore, a tendency to forgive may reduce the extent to which modeled violence (e.g., in the media) translates into subsequent aggression (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007). Thus, even if youth live in circumstances in which violence is modeled by others, a tendency to forgive could tend to minimize the negative effects. Some empirical evidence also suggests strategies that can promote forgiveness (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005).

**Humility.** Humility has also received attention within positive psychology (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A consideration of its opposite, narcissism, suggests that humility also deserves attention from violence researchers. Humility can be defined as a self-forgetfulness or defined negatively as an absence of pride (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). As operationalized by the Child Narcissism Scale (Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008), the central construct of narcissism is a sense that the self is better than others. This trait is the opposite of humility (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Significant evidence suggests that narcissism is associated with hostile aggression and violence (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). There is some evidence that narcissism is increasing in North American society (Twenge & Foster, 2010). In light of the evidence linking narcissism and violence, this variable deserves attention in youth violence research and interventions. From an applied perspective, building a trait, like humility, might be easier than reducing its opposite, narcissism. Thus, a strength-based approach examining humility and interventions building appropriate humility might deserve attention in youth violence research.

Some might fear that building humility would undermine efforts to build self-esteem. However, self-esteem bears little relation to narcissism among children as shown by weak or nonsignificant relations between measures of self-esteem and child narcissism (Thomaes et al., 2008). Self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1967) is characterized by a global perception that the self has value, by a positive attitude towards the self, by a sense that the self is at least equal to others, and a sense of satisfaction with the self. Thus, self-esteem is a sense of worth, but narcissism is a sense of superiority. These can be separated. If we define humility as the belief that others are of equal worth to the self, then humility can conceivably co-exist with self-esteem; equality with others does not necessitate a low value attributed to the self. Researchers could examine both the potential protective power of humility and also whether humility can be strengthened without sacrificing self-esteem or other protective factors.

**Altruism and Civic Values.** Altruism (or at least apparent altruism) also has been frequently studied by positive psychologists (Peterson, 2006). The relevance of altruism and civic values to youth violence research probably needs little defense. Youth engaged in service to others and engaged in efforts to improve their world will have less time and reason to develop identities that include violence or other destructive activities and possibly will develop greater emotional health (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

Strategies for creating altruism and civic values, however, may not be as clear. One strategy, service learning curricula, involves youth in projects that serve their community. The hope is that youth will bond to prosocial adults in the community and learn habits of serving their community. Such habits of serving others may indeed undermine the need to develop an identity that includes violence. A second strategy, involving youth in structured out of school

activities, may also generate altruistic behavior. In particular, youth involved in structured out of school experiences (e.g., lessons, sports) tend to report more frequent altruistic activities than do other youth (Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005). Causal direction is difficult to determine for the altruism effect, but at least one longitudinal study suggests a relation between youth activities (e.g., art, sports, dance, and student newspaper) and civic engagement in adulthood (Obradovic & Masten, 2007). The effect in this study may be mediated by a sense of competence. Again, the causal path could be debated, but the data suggest a possible means by which civic engagement and altruism develop.

**Gratitude.** Gratitude is also receiving attention in positive psychology (e.g., Bono, Emmons, & McCullough, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). There are many reasons to build gratitude. For example, Emmons and McCullough (2003) provided significant evidence that gratitude interventions make people happier. Among youth, even school satisfaction increased after a gratitude intervention (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008).

More importantly for the current situation, gratitude seems to contribute to prosocial behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008). If gratitude really does cultivate prosocial behavior, then these findings may be relevant to violence interventions. In particular, prosocial behavior could displace violent behavior. As the behaviorist tradition has suggested, interventions will often be more effective not by eradicating undesirable behavior, but instead by building behavior incompatible with the undesired behavior. Gratitude, by promoting prosocial behavior, may reduce the likelihood of violence.

**Other Esteem.** Our society has placed much value on self-esteem. Some of that attention is justified, but a virtue-perspective might place more value on esteem for others. Though Peterson and Seligman (2004) do not include esteem for others in their taxonomy of virtues, the construct may be a higher order factor underlying some other virtues such as gratitude, forgiveness, and kindness. In other words, people who esteem others might be more likely to treat others with kindness, to forgive others, and to be grateful to others.

One manifestation of esteem for others may be a tendency to trust. Significant evidence (Rotter, 1980) suggests that people who trust others tend to respect others' rights, and are less likely to lie, and possibly even less likely to steal or cheat. Thus, trust may be a character trait worthy of cultivation. At least some evidence suggests that trust levels in North America have declined, so attention may be further warranted (Rahn & Transue, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2010).

Also, another expression of other-esteem may be a tendency to assume good will when the intent of others' actions are ambiguous. For example, youth in our society frequently encounter crowds and will inevitably encounter situations in which they are bumped, jostled, or pushed or when the words of others are hurtful. Some youth will respond by assuming the actions are accidental or merely harmless fun. Others will assume malicious intent. While we prefer to think of this construct as a strength—tendency to assume good will—previous researchers have examined this from a pathology perspective using the label “hostile attribution bias”—a tendency to assume that slights from others are motivated by hostility. Measures of hostile attribution bias tend to be associated with both relational and physical aggression (Crick, 1995). Hostile attribution bias may even act as a mediator between exposure to media violence and subsequent aggression (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007). Thus, tendency to assume good will (the opposite of hostile attribution bias) may be a character strength that protects youth from involvement in violence.

As a result, the more general construct of other-esteem may deserve empirical research examining whether this strength protects youth from involvement in violence. Those youth who learn to esteem others may be less likely to treat others in violent ways as evidenced by the research on hostile attribution bias and trust.

Of course we are not implying that hostile attributions are never correct or that trust is always appropriate. Sometimes hostile attributions are accurate, appropriate, and necessary in order to protect oneself or others. The problem emerges when a youth seldom assumes good will--when he or she is biased against assuming good will. For that youth, their environment may have contributed to that pattern of thought, and possibly, as Rotter (1980) suggested, caring adults who model trust of others may help break this pattern.

**Prudence.** Prudence is also included in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) taxonomy of character strengths. Adam Smith (Theory of Moral Sentiments, IV.I.7) said that prudence includes two components, "reason and understanding, by which we are capable of discerning the remote consequences of all our actions, and of foreseeing the advantage or detriment which is likely to result from them: and secondly, self-command, by which we are enabled to abstain from present pleasure or to endure present pain, in order to obtain a greater pleasure or to avoid a greater pain in some future time." According to this definition, prudence includes self-control, and a tendency to consider future consequences. Some research has examined self-control. Some of that research suggests that self-control can be strengthened like a muscle through self-control exercises (Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999) and possibly even by physical exercise (Tomprowski, Davis, Miller, & Naglieri, 2008). Furthermore, research on its opposite, impulsivity, has found that impulsivity is measurable (e.g., Eysenck & Eysenck, 1978) and is associated with delinquent behavior. Thus, the evidence suggests that at least this one component of prudence (self-control) is modifiable and has a strong negative association with delinquent behavior. Thus, prudence could be further explored as a character strength relevant to violence. However, this exploration deserves some caution. Efforts to explain all criminal behavior as a lack of self-control have had limited success (Geis, 2000).

**Sense of Meaning.** Having a sense of meaning is not included in Seligman and Peterson's (2004) taxonomy of virtues, but they have suggested that a sense of meaning is produced by the "transcendence" cluster of virtues (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). Though this construct is not listed as a virtue within Seligman and Peterson's taxonomy, Wong (2007) has suggested that positive psychologists should devote more attention to sense of meaning especially among people who face hardship.

For some youth, life is especially difficult. Some, even in wealthy western countries, lack a reliable supply of food in their home. Some lack money to take part in many of the common structured out of school activities. For these, the lure of money, friendship in a gang, or a feeling of success in criminal activity may provide a significant lure. For these youth, attaining life satisfaction and positive purpose may be difficult. The prototypical message these youth will hear from popular media is that they can attain all their dreams; they can become anything they want to become, but most will not attain the commonly desired status of being wealthy or famous. Thus, a sense of meaning that is relevant to the common person may be particularly relevant to this group.

To the extent that the frustration-aggression hypothesis is true, youth who have unachievable life goals may be tempted to join in with violent groups (Wong, 1994). Those who grow up in poverty and hardship may find that many of the goals encouraged by society (wealth, fame, conspicuous consumption) seem unattainable by legal means. Providing youth with a

sense of meaning and positive purpose may steer them away from delinquent behavior. In particular, providing youth with strength-related goals relevant to positive psychology (e.g., character strengths, meaning, purpose) may provide meaningful achievable goals that reduce the likelihood of frustrated life goals. Further research can clarify this link.

***Frequent Positive Affect.*** The final construct considered within this domain of character strengths, frequent positive affect, is not traditionally considered to be a virtue, but instead seems to be a consequence of virtue development, so is included here. In particular, activation of character strengths seems to produce more frequent positive affect (Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Positive psychology has devoted much attention to positive affect, and this construct may also be relevant to the domain of violence. Significant research suggests that positive affect promotes prosocial behavior and avoidance of dangerous risks (Isen, 2000). Thus, people who experience regular positive affect may be less likely to act out in violence. Frequent positive affect may promote prosocial behavior and avoidance of risks, orientations antithetical to involvement with violence groups. Admittedly, positive affect may be difficult to sustain especially for people in difficult contexts, so other forms of well-being such as a sense of meaning are also worthy of attention.

This listing of character strengths is not meant to be exhaustive, but is intended to illustrate the fact that a positive psychology approach to youth violence is possible. Constructs receiving attention within positive psychology may have relevance to youth violence researchers. This review suggests some character strengths that are worthy of attention from youth violence researchers.

As discussed above, we are not the first to link positive traits and violence. This emphasis, however, on traits central to positive psychology in relation to youth violence is unusual and suggests directions for future research.

### ***Internal Strengths: Protective Beliefs***

Our final category of strengths specifically addresses illegal behavior so is understandably not included in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) more general taxonomy of character strengths. Nonetheless, a positive psychology approach to youth violence research suggests examination of strengths that protect against involvement in violence, even those specific to this domain. Thus, we include this final category: reasons not to commit crime.

Some research suggests that particular beliefs co-occur with violence among youth. For example, Slaby and Guerra (1988) assessed violence supporting beliefs with items such as "It's OK to hit someone if you just go crazy with anger." Their items differentiated low from high aggression high school students (e.g., those rated highly on "uses physical force to get his/her way"). The items also differentiated high school students from youth who have been convicted of violent crimes (Slaby & Guerra, 1988; see also Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, & Behrens, 2005). That set of beliefs, however, predicted violence, and so cannot easily be considered a strength. In contrast, a strength-based examination would examine beliefs that protect against violence—beliefs that should be built rather than eradicated in order to keep youth from being violent.

We are currently exploring the role of conscious reasons not to commit crime as a potential protective factor for youth. This research, however, is in a preliminary stage. We theorize that youth who strongly affirm many reasons not to commit crimes will be less likely to commit violent acts. Few studies have examined conscious reasons not to commit crimes (Rogers, 1977), and we know of no other scale assessing reasons to not commit crimes.

We began our exploration with open-ended questionnaires asking students to report five

reasons that they don't commit (more) crimes. The term "more" was included in parentheses because we assumed that some participants would be regularly engaged in at least petty criminal behavior. The nature of crime was purposely left undefined in order to allow participants to consider behaviors that they considered to be criminal. Based on these lists, a rating scale questionnaire was constructed representing each of the emerging constructs. Each item began with the following stem: "I do not commit (more) crimes...". So far, the scales include moral restrictions (e.g., "because I believe that kind of behavior is wrong"), long term consequences (because "I might hurt my chances for a good career"), harm to victim ("because of what it does to victims"), guilt (e.g., "because I'd feel terrible about what I did"), immediate consequences (e.g., "because don't want to get caught"), consequences to in-group (e.g., "because it would cause problems for my parents"), positive identity (e.g., "because I am a good person"), shame (e.g., "because people might think I am a criminal"), identity avoidance (e.g., "because I'm not that kind of person."), and lack of motivation (e.g., "because I simply don't want to"). All but one of the scales has produced Cronbach's Alpha of at least .80 in our preliminary testing with university students. Next, we intend to assess the psychometric structure with high school students and to assess concurrent validity in relation to actual violence.

#### **Erroneous Accusation: Strength Based Approach Blames Victims**

This strength-based approach to youth violence could be accused of focusing too much on the individual youth and ignoring social context. Some readers might even argue that this approach wrongly focuses on the youth who are themselves victims rather than correcting societal wrongs perpetrated on these youth.

This response would follow the thinking of William Ryan (1971) in his widely cited book entitled "Blaming the victim." He argued that any effort to modify traits of marginalized people is a form of victim blaming. Youth at risk are often marginalized: Some come from poverty stricken homes and some perform poorly in school. Thus, according to Ryan's thought, strength-based interventions would assume a victim blaming mentality.

Ryan's (1971) response, though being overstated, does highlight a justified concern. Many in society will be tempted to blame people who face trouble in their lives (e.g., Muller, Caldwell, & Hunter, 1994). Whether that trouble be related to poverty, homelessness, or being involved in a gang, many will be tempted to blame the individual. This type of blaming can free the observer to ignore the need, fail to help, and allow inequities to persist. Ryan (1971), however, claimed that any effort to help marginalized groups by changing the individuals is a form of victim blaming. Thus, even a strength building intervention would be a form of victim blaming.

One could imagine a reasonable debate on whether youth violence can be reduced by 1) promoting justice in society (e.g., see Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), or by 2) efforts to build strengths among youth, or, as we would advocate, 3) a combination of both. However, pejorative renaming of a strategy ("victim blaming") would marginalize a potentially justifiable and potentially well-intentioned strategy.

In fact, it might be reasonable to construe a model that integrates these two perspectives as part of the solution to youth violence. In particular, a lack of external resources among some youth could inhibit development of some internal resources (e.g., some character strengths and reasons not to commit crimes). In this model, rather than choosing between a strengths-based model and a social justice model, both can be integrated by managing social context (promoting justice) in order to provide social assets which in turn may build internal assets. Thus, each strength-based intervention will be just one piece of complex puzzle facilitating well-being

among youth.

### **Justified Concerns**

Some qualifications, however, deserve consideration. **First, pathology-reduction efforts will continue to be important in some cases.** Pathologies can constrain the extent to which strengths are relevant. For example, depression can be treated with positive psychology strategies, but for severe cases, the most immediate treatment will probably focus on reducing danger, and reducing the effects of the pathology. Similarly, when youth are showing seriously threatening behavior, threat assessment protocols in schools will focus immediately on managing risk, though subsequently they may move towards strength building. Likewise, gang intervention specialists and law enforcement officers may focus more on reducing the effects of possible adverse outcomes than on building strengths.

**Second, social sensitivity is necessary.** Anyone working with marginalized youth will have to use sensitivity in raising potentially uncomfortable recommendations related to character strengths like gratitude and forgiveness. Robert Persig (1974) raised a similar issue in his semi-autobiographical book entitled *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. His travel-mates were lacking gratitude. He realized (foreshadowing the recent empirical work by positive psychologists) that by practicing gratitude, his travel mates would be happier. But, he knew that preaching from him (a man with problems of his own) would not be well received. He said to himself, "...ingratitude, that's what it is. Blind alley, though. If someone's ungrateful and you tell him he's ungrateful, okay, you've called him a name. You haven't solved anything" (p. 52). Likewise, strength-based interventions will need to be sensitively provided especially for people in difficult circumstances. A focus on strengths should not tilt towards a blind positivity. Some people face difficult lives. A balanced positive psychology will build strengths but will also admit the reality of tragedy and seek to provide meaning that transcends tragedy (Wong, 2009). The work of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) is relevant here. As clinicians, they provide counseling to people who have experienced tragedies such as loss of a loved one. They also firmly believe that tragedies will often produce personal growth. Thus, they try to provide opportunities for their clients to grow, but they do so sensitively and while seeking to allow the client to accept or reject this opportunity without feeling like a failure.

**Third, those working in strength-based interventions could consider Kazdin's (2005) work with conduct disordered youth.** He works with the parents rather than the youth, yet his approach reduces symptoms of conduct disorder in the youth (see also Piquero, Farrington, Welsh, Tremblay, & Jennings, 2009). According to Kazdin, therapists have only a limited number of hours with the youth, but the parents may have daily contact over many years. Thus, according to Kazdin, the best effects are created if he can change the environment for the youth by changing the behavior of the parents. Likewise, those who want to build strengths among youth, especially those who want to initiate population wide strategies (Huppert; 2004) might want to start by training parents, teachers, coaches, and others in strength-building exercises (e.g., Proctor & Fox Eades, 2009).

**Fourth, culture deserves consideration because cultures differ in receptivity to strength-based interventions.** The work of Steven Heine (e.g., Heine et al., 2001) is relevant here. He has uncovered significant evidence that Japanese tend to focus on personal deficit reduction. They tend to be motivated to work especially when they see a weakness they can overcome. North Americans, in contrast, tend to work most when they are given feedback on their success or strengths. Cultural differences in receptivity were also highlighted by a Global Gallup Poll that asked the following: "Which would help you be more successful in your life—

knowing what your weaknesses are and attempting to improve your weaknesses, or knowing what your strengths are and attempting to build on your strengths?” (Hodges & Clifton, 2004, p. 256). Those from France, Japan, and China tended to be less interested in the strength information than were those from the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. The question of when strength-based versus weakness based programming will be effective is an empirical question, but the answer may be significantly influenced by the culture of the target group.

**Fifth, the precise relation between strengths and risk factors remains debatable.** For example, some strengths may exert influence independent of risk factors (main effects model). Other strengths may interact with risk factors (i.e., exerting influence only in the presence of risk factors or differentially in the presence of risk factors) Developmental psychopathologists have discussed these various models (e.g., Perkins & Borden, 2003). These are issues worthy of debate. However, the presence of alternative models cannot stop the important work of evaluating features of people and their environments that – regardless of precise mechanism of effect – are positive and healthy.

**Sixth, these strengths may be dynamic** (Douglas & Skeem, 2005). Many risk factors for violence are dynamic. Likewise, constructs like gratitude, forgiveness, and reasons not to commit crimes may be influenced by context, so these are not necessarily fixed traits. Interventions could potentially build these relevant strengths.

#### **Research in Action**

One problem, however, emerges. Practitioners often ignore research and researchers often ignore the needs of practitioners. As a result, practitioners are often unaware of research findings that should influence practice. Leadbeater and her colleagues (Leadbeater, Marshall, Banister, 2007) offer helpful guidance to cope with this problem. They argue that involving policymakers and practitioners in research might increase the likelihood that findings will be implemented. This procedure can increase both relevance and buy-in of the findings. We are trying to implement this process in our research on youth violence. We began with community forums to define the problem and needs. Next we recruited a steering committee of community representatives (e.g., RCMP, municipal government, school district, social service agencies). Now, we have completed preliminary research on reasons not to commit crimes. Our next step is a longitudinal study of violence and strengths among high school youth.

#### **Conclusion**

This review suggests that positive psychology can have relevance to societal problems such as youth violence. Though positive psychology has tended to focus on well-being and personal strengths, that tendency does not preclude the study of how strengths can be developed to overcome or minimize social problems. Youth violence is a social problem that may respond to strength-building interventions. Further research on youth strengths can provide guidance regarding the relation of strengths and violence.

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