

Identifying Strengths as Fuel for Change: A Conceptual and Theoretical Framework for the Youth Competency Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The juvenile justice system has made much progress over the past 100 years, yet much room for improvement remains. One of the most pressing rehabilitative challenges facing the field is developing a method and tools to identify youth strengths (based on commonly accepted youth development principles) as well as the more uniformly accepted process of tracking risks and problems across the population. Without an ability to identify and subsequently mobilize the strengths of youths in its charge, the juvenile justice system risks wasting one of the most important forms of fuel for change: youths' assets, talents, skills, and potential. Positing that activation of strengths is among important keys to building delinquency-free identity and permanent exit from the juvenile justice system, the authors believed that this critical gap needed to be addressed. In order to more fully examine the role of strengths in reclaiming youths, a tool was needed to assist

Juvenile justice lacks an agreed-upon assessment tool blending strength-based approaches with rehabilitative and punitive measures. The recently-piloted Youth Competency Assessment (YCA) is presented as one way to offer a strength-based tool compatible with traditional risk- and problem-based approaches. YCA's development and piloting processes are described, and the theoretical underpinnings supporting its three domains are summarized and analyzed.

practitioners in improving focus on this important element of a youth's identity.

This article presents a conceptual and theoretical framework for strength-based assessment and practice with juvenile offenders.

The framework has evolved into an assessment tool that three communities in the Pacific Northwest piloted in the last three years. Much development of the approach is yet to come, but the pilot offers important lessons regarding the process and impact of introducing such a tool into the juvenile justice environment, and the direction such a tool might take in its next phases.

Overview

At just past the juvenile court's 100th birthday, the court's founders would likely find much to celebrate and much yet to accomplish. The twentieth century made important progress in building effective juvenile justice interventions and related systems. Breakthroughs in risk

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assessment and management, breakthroughs regarding a variety of interventions focused on specific behavioral problems and modifications (sex offenses, violent offenses, decreasing recidivism through aftercare), and breakthroughs in the community's role in balanced and restorative justice are evidence of this (Bazemore & Walgrave, 1999; Hoge, 2001; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2001; Rubin, 2003).

Even with these advances, a number of challenges persist. These include the juvenile justice system's ability to respond to the increasing proportion of youths entering with alcohol and drug problems and on drug-related charges (Schiraldi, Holman, & Beatty, 2000), the system's ability to give as much weight to youth development and redemption as it does to risk and pathology (Bazemore & Nissen, 2000), the need to address the continuing reality that minority youths are disproportionately arrested and incarcerated (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2000), and the growing numbers of youths who are transferred, or risk being transferred, to the adult criminal justice system—leaving behind most rehabilitative opportunities (Fagan & Zimring, 2000).

The "strength-based approach" to intervention is one critical area of youth practice that the juvenile justice system has under-explored. A strength-based approach is one that consciously attends to principles and characteristics such as:

- Assuming client strengths are present, and that it is important to respect them;
- Believing that generating client motivation for change involves capably fostering client strengths;
- Considering interveners as partners in the process of finding and building strengths; and
- Seeing all environments, even the most impoverished, as full of resources (Saleebey, 1997).

The strength-based approach is a family of ideas and intervention strategies that share a common focus: tapping the all-too-infrequently acknowledged gifts, capabilities, and positive aspects of client groups, even those with significant challenges. Strength-based client advocates see the approach as an alternative to what they consider to be excessive negative labeling. It intentionally concentrates on aspects of a client's life most amenable to producing much-needed energy and momentum for positive change. The approach does not

eliminate accountability or the need to understand the nature and challenge of presenting problems; instead, it seeks to see these risks and needs in balance with the most likely resources present (personal, family, or community-anchored) that will bridge the client from a troubled present to a more positive future (Rapp, 1998; Saleebey, 1997, 2001; Weick & Chamberlain, 1997).

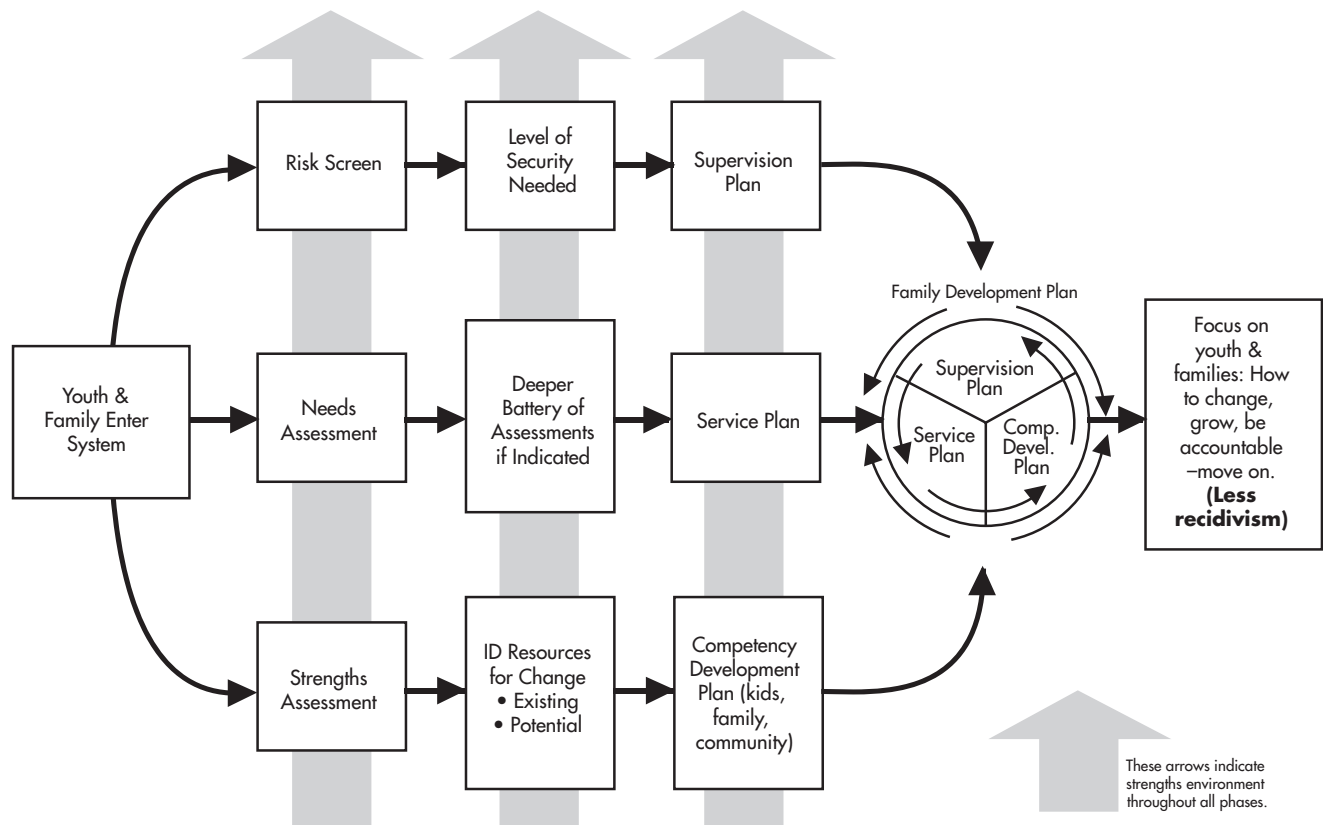
The strength-based approach has appeared in the juvenile justice literature since the mid-1960s. Practice frameworks involving strength-based approaches with juvenile offenders have received preliminary exploration (Clark, 1995, 1999). The value of strength-based approaches has been mentioned in one of the most promising evidence-based practices in juvenile justice, Multisystemic Therapy (Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, & Cunningham, 1999), in balanced and restorative justice (Bazemore & Nissen, 2000), and in an analysis of youths who successfully fulfilled their obligations to the juvenile justice system and did not return (Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Schultz, & D'Ambrosio, 2001).

Yet an agreed-upon set of strength-based measures or tools has yet to emerge in this literature. Moving a strength-based approach from a "promising philosophy" to a carefully constructed, validated, and refined working tool is a necessary step in the evolution of this practice area.

To meet this challenge, the Youth Competency Assessment (YCA) has been developed. The YCA is a first-of-its-kind, brief, strength-based assessment tool and protocol specifically designed for use in juvenile justice settings. To develop a strength-based assessment tool for the juvenile justice system, a framework for organizing ideas was needed, based on the following three questions:

1. Can juvenile justice workers reliably and validly identify strengths? If so, how should questions be structured to elicit the most in-depth information, which is the ultimate focus of the YCA?
2. What is the relationship between identifying these strengths and developing service plans that dictate and guide a youth's experience in the juvenile justice system?
3. What is the relationship of strengths identified by the YCA, as well as the plans developed by them, to increased positive outcomes for youth following their juvenile justice experience?

FIGURE 1
Future Model
Screen/Assessment Method with Strengths Assessment Component



Risk-and problem-focused assessments are part of the traditional juvenile justice process, but introduction of a strength-based assessment tool presents the possibility of an entirely new set of information for case managers and youth professionals. In Figure 1, the research team presents a logic model for the active presence of strength-based assessment information in juvenile justice. The top two horizontal lines represent traditional juvenile justice practice, with the bottom line representing the potential for strength-based shifts in practice based on asking new types of questions during the assessment phase. The underlying theory of this approach is that increasing attention paid to strengths during the assessment phase will lead to supervision plans that balance accountability, youth development, positive youth involvement, and community reintegration in order to decrease recidivism and promote long-term success.

A Strength-Based Approach: The Family Tree

Strength-based human services’ long and notable history dates from the founding of the field of social work. In response to what most historians consider a dominant “problem focus” in human services (Saleebey, 1997), the strength-based approach is a perspective that works to address a client’s problems by focusing on his or her skills, interests, and support systems, thereby providing a foundation for the client to grow and succeed at positive change. A family tree of strength-based perspectives in youth services has many branches, including, but not limited to, a focus on youthful resilience in the face of significant risks or challenging life circumstances (Katz, 1997), a focus on assets needed to successfully negotiate adolescence to adulthood (Benson, 1999), a focus on developing youth competencies in the face of environments that do not meet the needs of young people as they mature (Werner & Smith, 1992), a focus

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on the importance of community ownership of youth development as a cornerstone of healthy community functioning (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Hawkins, Catalano, & Associates, 1992; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994), and a focus on competency development for youths involved with the juvenile justice system (Bazemore & Walgrave, 1999).

In the face of such a diverse literature base, the research team saw a need to organize this information into distinct categories. Three categories, or domains, were selected because they are particularly relevant yet currently under-recognized within traditional juvenile justice practice. These domains are:

1. Repairing harm: developing positive norms and values.
2. Creating a healthy identity.
3. Connecting to family, peers, and community.

Due to the formative nature of strength-based assessment, a panel of experts was convened to provide advice on developing the instrument. They recommended the construction of a heuristic and qualitative open-ended device for the initial pilot. Eventually the long-term goal may be to further develop and formalize a more psychometrically rigorous strength-based assessment for use in the juvenile justice setting.

To increase the likelihood that practitioners would use the tool simultaneously with other problem- and risk-based assessment formats, the research team saw a need to keep the tool brief, flexible, responsive to practitioners' needs, and distinctly value-added rather than redundant.

Most important, the team wanted to ensure that the tool successfully achieved its primary aim of allowing front-line juvenile justice practitioners (primarily probation staff) to gather new and traditionally under-explored information they could use to construct innovative, strength-based service plans that ultimately would contribute to more positive outcomes for youths and families.

The YCA includes questions that cover the three domains of repairing harm, creating a healthy identity, and forging connections. In addition, the YCA Training Manual includes supplemental questions that may be used to augment or replace items on the tool. The intent of the YCA is to guide staff in covering the three domains so they may gather enough information to create a service or case plan in these three goal areas.

Immediately following the formal construction of the tool, the research team initiated a pilot study in three communities in the Pacific Northwest. The pilot tested the

domains, the training, and the tool itself. Juvenile department staff from each participating community attended an orientation training that included an overview of the strength-based philosophy, in-depth information about the domains, and strategies for extracting strength-based information from the process to be utilized in developing new types of service plans with youths.

The YCA Part A: The Repairing Harm and Developing Positive Norms and Values Domain

The premise underlying this domain is that to leave the path of delinquency and criminality, youthful offenders must develop or strengthen pro-social attitudes and internalize positive norms and values. In addition, by being held accountable to repair the harm their negative behavior has done to others, youths can learn important lessons and facilitate their moral development. Research on youthful offenders has demonstrated that an antisocial attitude is a major criminogenic risk factor. In order to decrease re-offending, it is crucial that youths understand and buy into positive norms and values, without which it is very difficult to succeed in keeping youths out of trouble (Latessa, 2004). While former juvenile delinquents may behave appropriately in the short term, the changes are rarely sustained without a solid foundation of pro-social norms and values.

The juvenile justice system has a dual purpose for intervening with young people who are harming others: to increase public safety and to decrease negative behavior. A major focus of juvenile justice has been to hold youths accountable, which has primarily been interpreted as a need to impose sanctions for negative behavior. Standard interventions include a wide range of options, starting with warnings and informal contracts, moving to formal probation agreements, fees, and community service, and progressing to more serious sanctions such as removing youths from their homes or communities through short- or long-term detention stays. Interventions that build on a youth's skills or interests are less common but offer many benefits, such as helping engage a youth and his or her family in the learning and change process, and developing trust between the youth, family, and service provider.

Moral Development

Moral development, according to the developmental psychology literature, refers to the development of pro-social norms and values and includes an interest

in and concern for other people (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998). Theories about how the factors leading to moral development occur are varied, and include psychoanalytic, behaviorist, socio-cultural, cognitive, and biological factors. However, it is likely that a person's moral nature is an integration of many aspects of her or his psychological makeup (Colby & Damon, 1992).

Berkowitz and Grych (1998) theorize that several factors need to be present for morality to develop. These factors include: (a) social orientation, which is rooted in a secure attachment to caregivers, and would in turn provide a greater likelihood that a youth would adhere to family rules (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wahl, 1978); (b) self-control, which is developed early in life as the capacity to resist temptation and suppress impulses, and forms the belief that "moral agents must have some capacity to control their own behavior" (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998, p. 374); (c) compliance with external standards, an understanding that there are external rules and values that should be adhered to, which helps develop the internalization of societal norms and standards for acceptable behavior; and (d) self-esteem, a sense of one's own inherent value, which when absent leads to social dysfunctions and mental pathologies (Harter, 1997). Clearly, these factors influence whether youths remain involved in delinquent behaviors.

Fortunately, it is rare to find youths completely lacking in all of these areas. Most are capable of change and growth. A strength-based model allows us to identify which components the youth has, then draw upon them to encourage moral development. For example, participating in activities that help youths build, or rebuild, attachments to family members, positive peers, and community members provides a mechanism for allowing growth in social orientation, self-esteem, empathy, and altruism, among other benefits. A strength-based approach provides a mechanism for encouraging healthy adolescent development, and consequently, decreased juvenile—and eventually adult—offending.

Restorative Justice and the Need for a Balanced Approach in Juvenile Justice

A growing body of knowledge affirms the use of balanced community-based systems to support restorative sanctions and processes (e.g., community service, victim involvement, mediation, and restitution) and related approaches as catalysts for change in the juvenile justice

system (Bazemore & Umbreit, 1994).

After more than a decade of research and practical experience in restorative practices strategies, researchers and practitioners have identified three programming priorities that describe a conceptual framework for intervention practices. These priorities include accountability, community protection, and competency development (Bazemore & Schiff, 2001; Bazemore & Umbreit, 1994; Pranis & Bazemore, 2001). The system is balanced when resources are equally allocated among the three program priorities. To achieve a balanced approach, these researchers say, a given case must be individualized and based on the circumstances of the offense and offender's needs, risks, and strengths.

Additionally, Umbreit (1997) defines restorative justice as emphasizing the importance of elevating the role of crime victims and community members through more active involvement in the justice process, holding offenders directly accountable to the people and communities they have violated, restoring the emotional and material losses of victims, and providing a range of opportunities for dialogue, negotiation, and problem solving, whenever possible—which can lead to a greater sense of community safety, social harmony, and peace for all involved. The research on restorative justice provided a foundation for developing this domain of the YCA.

Experts in behavior modification (e.g., Watson & Tharp, 1985) offer two principles that contribute to a greater understanding of the potential benefits of a restorative justice approach:

1. Learning experiences are a powerful force for behavior change, and personal experiences create more long-lasting changes in behavior.
2. Punishment is not as effective at preventing future negative behavior as incentives and rewards are, and in some cases can contribute to worsened outcomes because punishment alone does not teach new behaviors.

These findings contribute additional support for the use of strength-based assessment and interventions, particularly with youths.

This domain focuses on helping staff support the youth's efforts to repair harm. This category is designed to identify indicators of moral development specifically geared toward making amends for problems, dif-

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ficulties, and pain caused to others due to the youth's negative behavior.

Staff members are urged to pay attention to culturally specific ways of addressing wrongdoing, acknowledging harm, and setting accountability structures and practices into motion (Umbreit & Coates, 2000). Specific resources to provide balanced and restorative justice programming in a culturally congruent framework are needed. Examples of efforts to repair harm include helping youths acknowledge wrongdoing, develop or expand their capacity for empathy, identify family members and friends who anchor them in an appropriate sense of right and wrong, and identify and describe experiences in which someone wronged them and then apologized.

Preliminary Lessons Learned

During the pilot of the YCA, staff discovered that despite their early fears to the contrary, a strength-based approach was consistent with their agencies' missions of holding youths accountable and promoting behavior change. Staff reported that youths and families were more engaged with their case plans because they reflected the youth's and families' interests and built on their existing strengths. Youths and families were also more compliant when sanctions were applied because they more clearly understood the expectations staff had of them, had been involved in the decision-making process, and had been provided options for avoiding those sanctions.

These impacts contributed to staff perceptions that their cases were completed more quickly than before using the YCA, and that they reduced their use of detention as a sanction.

The YCA Part B: The Pathways Toward a Healthy Identity Domain

This domain's premise is that youths with healthy identities are more likely to grow into healthy adults. Because developing an identity is the central task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968), and because the majority of juvenile justice-involved youths are in this developmental stage, Pathways Toward a Healthy Identity is an essential domain of the Youth Competency Assessment. It is the context within which the youth's skills, competencies, and goals for the future are identified and plans made for using those resources to create a healthy identity.

Identity, though perceived by the individual youth, must be recognized and confirmed by others (Erikson, 1968). By identifying and building on competencies in the strength-based approach, family members, juvenile justice staff, and others help incorporate competencies into a healthy identity for the youth. Some mechanisms for doing so include positive reinforcement (Skinner, 1957), and knowledge gained in the study of positive psychology, which found that adding new and positive friends, skills, or behaviors is easier than subtracting them (Watson & Tharp, 1985).

Individuals who work with youths during this time in their lives have the opportunity to help young people whose identities include negative behaviors—such as criminality or substance use—to channel their skills and energies to positive activities and a healthier identity.

Erikson's (1968) theory of adolescent identity development has traditionally served as the foundation for understanding behavior during adolescence, a transitional stage into adulthood (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Erikson theorized that each stage of the life cycle occurs as a challenge that requires successful resolution to progress to the next stage. Adolescence, according to Erikson, is marked by the challenge of identity versus identity confusion. Successfully developing a healthy identity is a function of: (a) feeling comfortable with oneself; (b) having a plan for the future; (c) being able to manipulate one's environment successfully; and (d) having the capacity to integrate present identifications with future aspirations to develop a healthy personal and social identity (Erikson, 1968).

Adolescent research has traditionally focused on individual development and functioning, but more recently it has focused on examining the settings in which this growth is occurring (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). These contexts include, but are not limited to, families, peer groups, and schools. Developing a healthy identity, therefore, involves the integration of past experiences, personal perceptions, and social norms and expectations (Sprinthall & Collins, 1984).

Additional support for this domain was found in the more contemporary youth development field, which encourages focus on the community's role in contributing to the relative health of its youths. Additional attention must be paid to the developmental nutrients available in a community, and the adults' responsibility to self-monitor and continually reinforce the availability of adequate amounts of positive youth enterprises

that are both attractive to them and accessible (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003). Emphasizing this relationship, youth development itself has been defined as: "A process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically and cognitively competent" (National Collaboration for Youth, 1999, p. 3).

The Pathways Toward a Healthy Identity domain was designed to identify resources, interests, and capabilities for pro-social development in a youth's environment that are most likely to develop positive components to the youth's identity. Once identified, these components are instrumental in the youth's progress toward developing a healthy, successful engagement in life after involvement in the juvenile justice system. Some examples of capabilities in this domain are previous experience overcoming challenges or accomplishing personal, family, or team goals (however defined by youths), pro-social interests, and a willingness and ability to plan their lives and develop positive action plans for the future.

Preliminary Lessons Learned

Several themes related to the Pathways Toward a Healthy Identity domain emerged from focus groups held with juvenile justice staff and supervisors who piloted the YCA:

1. The YCA helps gather data about positive qualities, areas of potential, and talents that provide more and different information compared to traditional assessment focused on problems and risks.
2. The YCA helps youths and families feel more comfortable, share more, and create a stronger sense of engagement and motivation for change than a traditional assessment.
3. The YCA helps identify ideas and resources for creating client-centered case plans. Youths at the pilot sites who had been assessed by staff using the YCA were more than twice as likely as comparison-site youths to report that their counselor or probation officer asked about their strengths. Key stakeholders (e.g., district attorneys, public defenders, judges, treatment providers) noted that staff seemed to know more about the youth (family, goals, and strengths), and that this knowl-

edge, rather than a focus on deficits and weaknesses, set the youth up to succeed. This also helped the stakeholders plan the transition into the community (Mackin, Weller, & Tarte, 2004).

The YCA Part C: The Connecting with Family, Peers, and Community Domain

The foundation of this domain is that youths who are strongly connected to their families, positive peers, and their communities are less likely to behave in ways that could potentially damage those connections. A sense of community contributes to greater health and increased positive social control. Youths who are engaged in their communities and have strong families and positive peers are more committed to and respectful of others and are more likely to develop into healthy adults. There is a strong focus on helping staff support youths in building connections with their families, peers, and communities in practical ways. This category includes identifying potential social relationships with pro-social partners in the community. Staff members are urged to pay specific attention to cultural resources for youths, in their families and communities. This category draws upon community resources, potentially in new ways, and requires a careful, in-depth understanding of traditional and non-traditional community resources, social capital, and cultural dynamics in a variety of community settings.

Examples of efforts to make connections between youths and their environment include helping them gain experiences with leadership or mentoring, meet pro-social role models, participate in service-oriented activities, and build on family and peer strengths.

As part of adolescence, youths increase their social skills and enhance their connections with others. Many parents and guardians notice this increased connectedness by witnessing their children on the phone for hours or constantly asking to spend time with their friends. Successfully forming these connections with peers who are a positive influence is crucial in helping youths form their identities (as described in the previous section) and guiding them on their path toward adulthood.

A connection with a positive adult is a demonstrated protective factor against juvenile justice involvement (Hanna, 2001; Hawkins et al., 2000). That is, youths who create and maintain strong connections with family members or other pro-social adults are less likely to get

in trouble or have patterns of negative behaviors. Family members and family dynamics are especially meaningful during this developmental period. Strong, safe, stable, and supportive families provide children with a buffer against life's negative influences; youths who lack appropriate supervision or who have experienced serious conflicts, abuse, neglect, or other trauma are at greater risk of juvenile justice involvement (Loeber & Farrington, 2001). In addition, social isolation from peers has been linked to increased risk of acting out behavior and violence (Huizinga & Jakob-Chien, 1998).

The research on sense of community and social capital clearly indicates that strong social ties contribute to increased physical and emotional health (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993), increased social control or greater compliance with community norms (Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman, & Chavis, 1990), and greater commitment to the good of the community (Goss, 1994). In other words, youths who live in neighborhoods with a strong sense of community are more likely to grow into healthy adults and in turn maintain the health of their communities by their civic involvements.

Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) compiled studies of the relationships between social and physical health. They found that people who have a strong sense of community and who feel they are supported have more positive physical health outcomes. They have better recovery rates from, and lower incidence of, disease and better addiction recovery rates. People with weak social ties have significantly higher death rates than socially integrated persons.

Communities with a strong sense of connections between members are often notable for their informal social control mechanisms. Traditionally characteristic of small towns or towns with a stable population, but possible in urban settings as well, sense of community can be seen where "everyone knows everyone else" or where neighbors or relatives (sometimes these are the same people) report youth misbehavior and deal with it informally, through family and community sanctions.

Because these types of communities are more likely to operate under the philosophy that "it takes a village to raise a child," adults in the community take responsibility for supervising youths, modeling appropriate behavior, and teaching community norms and values (Cochrun, 1994). These social control mechanisms can be a successful means of protecting youths from escalating negative behavior. Increased social control can help maintain social

stability and decrease crime, substance abuse, violence, and mental illness (Lackey, Burke, & Peterson, 1987).

As residents become more involved in their community, they become more invested in it and protective of it, develop more positive self-images and self-confidence, and prevent self-destructive and anti-social behavior (Lackey et al., 1987). Connection among residents provides support and comfort. It mobilizes a group to respond to community needs.

Opportunities for youths, particularly youths with reputations for negative behavior, can be difficult to find in some communities. This third domain of the YCA focuses on how staff can help youths make community connections, but it is also important to consider the potential need for advocating, at the system and community levels, to increase community members' willingness to work with adolescents.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) describe how people who want to strengthen the social components of their communities are focusing on the capacities and assets at the community level, identifying assets and building relationships among the community's assets. Their exercises for identifying potential partners and strengthening partnerships can be useful resources for agencies that work with youths and are committed to increasing their positive community connections. They also suggest the types of community resources that can be developed into partners for helping youths.

Preliminary Lessons Learned

During the pilot testing of the YCA, staff members faced budget constraints in their departments and communities. Resources upon which they traditionally relied, such as treatment slots and detention beds, became more limited. This backdrop provided additional incentive for staff creativity about appropriate case plan activities and services, and it demanded that staff tap into as many existing resources for the youths as possible. Using resources already in the youth's environment offers several benefits, including being free or low cost, having the potential to be more sustainable because of the integral role of natural helpers (defined as "lay persons to whom others naturally turn for advice, emotional support and tangible aid," Israel, 1985, p. 66), and being more accessible and comfortable for youths and their families, which may promote engagement.

By involving the youth and family in case planning, and by building in activities based on the youth's inter-

ests and consistent with the family's cultural values, staff found that youths and parents or guardians were engaged in the case plan earlier and to a greater extent.

Staff shared many experiences in which they were able to connect a youth with a person in a career the youth was interested in, or in classes and activities that gave the youth vocational or educational experiences he or she would not have had before staff used the YCA and began thinking differently about their case plans. The activities that engaged the youth can also serve as powerful incentives for completing other court requirements.

Core Areas of Discovery for Professionals Working with Youths

Using a youth's competencies can be a particular challenge for juvenile justice staff working with youths to develop case plans because this use runs counter to dominant traditions of seeking out problems and risk areas. It is especially important for staff to identify new and creative resources that will enhance the often minimal options available to juvenile staff creating such plans. Staff need special knowledge of youth-serving community institutions (i.e., schools, youth leadership opportunities, faith communities, and community resources such as Boys & Girls Clubs) that are willing to work with youths in the juvenile justice system. Having access to such resources helps staff produce individualized case plans that build on the youth's competencies and connections with family, peers, and the community, thereby helping youths progress toward a healthy identity. Staff should focus special attention on culturally specific and relevant models of success and health for a particular youth, family, and community.

The Interaction of the Three Domains

The YCA's three domains, as illustrated by Figure 2, (along with a brief sample of YCA questions) are inter-related. The objective of the YCA is to cover these three areas in the assessment and to progress toward these three goals through the case plan. As the YCA model indicates, each domain has a connection in a circular fashion to the others; as one domain is strengthened, it contributes positively to the others.

If the youth has strengths that are more apparent in one domain than others, that domain presents a perfect starting point for building a competency development plan. It is important that youths (and

their families) recognize or experience early progress and successes on which they can build.

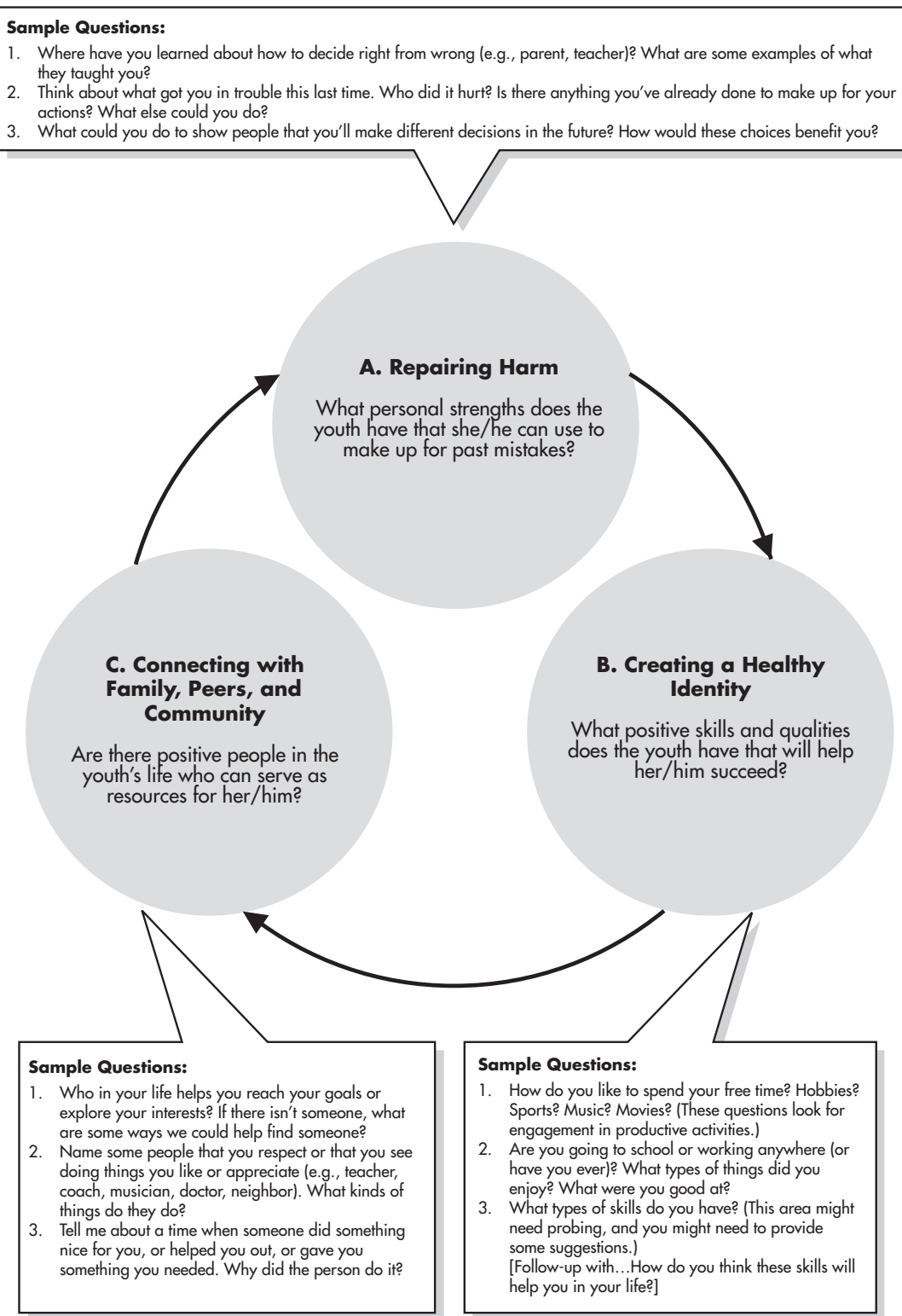
When the YCA was first developed, Creating a Healthy Identity was the first domain. The research team believed that talking to youths about their interests would be a good place to start a relationship and find ways to engage them. However, in the pilot testing phase, as the juvenile justice agencies integrated the YCA into their usual work flow, the agencies found that Repairing Harm was a better starting point, as they already needed to discuss the court's expectations with youths in the first meeting. The tool appears flexible enough to allow users to determine which order the domains are introduced.

The YCA is a starting point for strength-based practice to occur. The path of competency development is not linear; covering the three domains eventually is more important than the order in which they are addressed. Ideally, as progress is made in one domain, it will have a positive influence on the others, spurring additional benefits. For example, as youths undertake activities to repair harm, including rebuilding trust with family members or others, positive connections with those people in the youth's life are also likely to increase. As connections with others strengthen, particularly as young people build on their competencies and interests, they likely are concurrently developing a healthier identity. This healthier identity and improved relationships with others tend to make it easier for the youth to recognize the difference between healthy and unhealthy decisions, and to make up for past mistakes. The point of utilizing the YCA, and working to build competencies, is to reverse any downward spiral the youth may be experiencing and create a positive, self-sustaining pattern of behavior.

Preliminary Experiences in Real World Settings

The pilot study used focus groups with staff who had used the YCA to discuss what was going well, the challenges faced in implementing the tool, and how they addressed those challenges. One concern was how to balance enthusiasm for the idea with the time constraints of the professionals involved. Staff found that the YCA and its approach, especially when used as a stand-alone assessment, typically required more effort in the initial stages of a case, but saved work and time later. The savings in time and work came from a rapport established among the counselor, youth, and family early in

FIGURE 2
Youth Competency Assessment (YCA) Model



the process, which led to: (a) the youth and family members sharing a greater amount of useful information; (b) increased motivation by the youth; and (c) increased cooperation and involvement from the youth and family members. Staff reported that these factors—a result of the YCA and the competency development approach—led to an earlier completion of probation contracts. As one probation officer put it, “They seem to be jumping in and getting it done instead of languishing.”

The potential for increasing energy and positive attitudes was a related benefit of the pilot. In another pilot site, the juvenile court judge established “Atta Boy” and “Atta Girl” hearings for youths—one of her many methods for looking for and acknowledging positive qualities and actions by youthful offenders. These hearings provided time to publicly showcase a youth’s progress.

Staff members, though they wanted to connect youths with opportunities that reflected their strengths, discovered that these types of activities often were not available to juvenile offenders. They responded creatively, matching youths’ skills and competencies with new connections in the community. As this new matching process occurred, staff shared those ideas and resources with their fellow staff members. They designated space—for instance, a bulletin board or a resource drawer—for posting information to aid others searching to connect youths with opportunities to use and build on their competencies.

All three pilot counties faced a third concern: How to continue providing needed services to youths in a time of serious state budget cutbacks. The pilot counties found that introducing the YCA and the strength-based approach was something that could be done without further constraining limited resources. These counties observed that shorter probation periods and reduced use of other more expensive sanctions, such as detention, more than compensated for costs associated with increased time used for assessments. They also theorized that reductions in recidivism would bring additional cost savings. The research team plans to test this hypothesis in future studies.

The three pilot sites eventually incorporated questions from the YCA into their existing risk and needs assessment forms, thereby reducing paperwork and ensuring they consistently used the approach throughout the assessment. Staff found that as they gained experience with YCA questions and this approach, they gathered the necessary information more quickly

than initially.

Pilot staff reported the YCA to be a powerful tool for rebuilding the connection between the youth and family members, both by allowing them to reveal what they really liked and admired about each other, and by allowing them to get to know each other in new ways. In some cases, such revelations led to greater understanding between youths and parents, or greater self-awareness for parents or youths. For example, one mother who participated in the YCA with her son later shared with the staff member that hearing so much talk about her son’s strengths made her realize that she too had strengths she could summon to get help for herself and for her son. She then proceeded to make contacts with people and organizations that could help her make changes in her life.

Juvenile justice staff found that a focus on strengths and competencies led to acknowledging their own competencies, as well as those of their co-workers. One department dedicated a bulletin board to celebrating positive qualities and actions of their co-workers.

As a result of the positive experiences of staff who piloted the YCA, the three pilot sites incorporated the strength-based approach into their assessments, department policies, and practices.

Discussion and Next Steps

The YCA as envisioned and developed is not the only tool a professional needs for working with juvenile offenders. It is not intended to replace systematic risk or needs assessment, as knowledge of these areas is very important in identifying the right youths for intervention and matching them with the appropriate type and level of service and supervision. However, the YCA fills a necessary, neglected role in many agencies and systems. It helps prevent staff, and consequently youths and families, from focusing only on deficits. It provides a foundation on which to build healthy youths and strong families, and a related structure in which to fashion new types of service plans that not only address problems and risks, but seek to amplify and encourage the development of positive and pro-social behaviors.

In its current form, the YCA is a qualitative tool that is not scored. As such, it differs from other standardized assessments that staff may be accustomed to. Staff members must be comfortable asking open-ended questions and using solution-focused or motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 1991) techniques for probing when

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needed. The YCA is a tool to help build a relationship with a youth and family and create an environment for change. As such, it is designed to be flexible and adaptable to varied staff styles and differences in youths, such as age, gender, cultural background, and developmental level. It allows for creativity and individualization.

The structure and format of the YCA challenges the user to think beyond a traditional menu of case planning options. It may require staff to engage in the case planning process to a larger degree than before, invest time developing appropriate community relationships and partners, and address institutional constraints that impede successful incorporation of the strength-based approach.

Testing the validity and reliability of a qualitative instrument is a different process from testing a standardized assessment tool. The YCA has undergone pilot testing in juvenile justice agencies in three counties (Mackin, Weller, & Tarte, 2004), but the research team is still in the early stages of reliability and validity testing. Further testing is needed to identify outcomes for youths, staff, and systems as the YCA and other strength-based practices mature in these sites, and to test how dissemination works in other geographic regions, jurisdictions, and service system types. For example, implementation of the YCA in adolescent substance abuse treatment settings and schools is being pursued, and the tool or process may need to be adapted to fit the unique needs of those systems. However, the research team believes the three domains will likely continue to be relevant for adolescents being served in settings beyond the juvenile justice system.

Impact of the YCA on Systems, Staff, and Stakeholders

Use of the YCA requires some level of commitment to systems change. The research team found that when staff became trained in the strength-based approach and started using the tool, they wanted their systems to support the institutionalization of the tool. Once staff members had information about strengths from the YCA, they wanted to use that information. Staff pushed their organizations to examine whether their structures and practices could accommodate and support a strength-based approach to case management and where they needed changes. As a result of this interest, organizations that choose to use the YCA may subsequently adapt their mission statements, forms, policies, or practices to include competencies.

Also, adopting the YCA demanded that associ-

ated agency partners and systems—such as treatment providers and programs to which the departments historically referred youths—be aware and accepting of competency development and, eventually, integrate the approach. Staff became less comfortable sending youths to programs that did not also have a balanced approach that included strengths.

In addition to systems changes, the YCA can change professional practices. The YCA encourages greater reliance on natural helpers (as defined earlier in this paper), and people and other resources already in the youth's environment. It also implies a move to sharing power with youths and families in decision making and planning.

Sharing power also means sharing responsibility for successes and setbacks. Staff changed their attitudes about youths as they discovered interests and skills of which they were previously unaware in youths and their families. As staff began to see the youths and families in a different light, they responded with greater engagement and respect. Staff reported using fewer sanctions because fewer were needed and because the staff's perception of when sanctions were needed had changed.

Staff members were allowed room for creativity in developing their case plans, which can involve more time but yield powerful results. Using the YCA sets up expectations for staff to work hard with youths and families, but that work is energizing rather than draining. In focus group discussions, staff who used the YCA reported increases in their job satisfaction and in overall staff morale.

Finally, the YCA impacts other stakeholders besides the staff and systems using it. Youths and families became more engaged with their probation officers and the case plans. Youths perceived their probation officers more positively than youths who had been assessed only with traditional methods. Parents and guardians were sometimes surprised by the approach. They often expected, and wanted, the juvenile justice system to impose sanctions or treat their child sternly. However, the YCA experience helped them remember their child's positive and unique qualities, identify their own strengths, and regain the energy to work toward change and support their child to do so while still maintaining a critical focus on accountability.

Initially, the sites experienced widespread concern about stakeholders' perceptions. Would the public, judges, and victims criticize the juvenile justice agency for

treating juvenile offenders too “lightly” or “rewarding” them after their misbehavior? The results of the pilot study indicated that these fears were unfounded. The key stakeholder groups seemed to understand the benefits of a balanced approach and to look for long-range outcomes: These youths need to be rehabilitated, and juvenile justice needs to prevent them from hurting others. The system needs to take responsibility for youths, hold them accountable, teach them positive lessons, and guide them toward changing their behavior. The goal is to ensure that youths who enter the juvenile justice system leave better off than when they arrived.

In the framework of the YCA, achieving that goal means these youths have worked toward: (a) repairing harm and developing positive norms and values; (b) developing healthy identities through pursuit of their strengths and interests; and (c) connecting to their families, positive peers, and their communities.

Conclusion

This article has presented the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings for a new approach to assessment in juvenile justice settings. This approach was designed

to complement, not replace, other traditional forms of problem and risk assessment. By carefully analyzing the need for tools that can increase positive outcomes for delinquent youths, the authors developed the YCA with specific attention to filling a major gap: the need for a resource that could identify, amplify, and mobilize strengths and resources that might otherwise go unrecognized in traditional assessment approaches.

The instrument was developed by synthesizing literature on adolescent development and balanced and restorative justice. The initial pilot in three Pacific Northwest communities proved promising and worthy of additional development and evaluation as the YCA continues its evolution and application in the field. Staff and administrators who participated in the pilot phase found the tool to be flexible, adaptable, and generally appreciated. Youths and families liked a strength-based approach to assessment and found it increased their positive feelings about those responsible for their case planning.

The YCA provides juvenile justice leaders and practitioners with a new tool and accompanying support strategies that hold much potential for increasing the effectiveness of the juvenile justice system.

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