How Adolescents Develop Responsibility: What Can Be Learned From Youth Programs

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This theory-building qualitative study examined how youth develop responsibility within the context of organized youth programs. Interviews were conducted with ethnically diverse youth, parents, and adult leaders from four programs for high school–aged teens. Analysis suggested that youth develop responsibility through a four-step cycle: (1) voluntarily taking on roles and obligations, (2) experiencing challenge and strain, (3) being motivated to fulfill their obligations, and (4) internalizing a self-concept that leads to responsible behavior in other contexts. Leaders support this learning cycle by creating program structures and providing ongoing support that helps youth experience ownership of demanding roles. Peers contribute by providing a sense of solidarity while also imposing mutual accountability.

Responsibility is a character trait that is highly valued by society. Its acquisition is seen as essential to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). Yet many adolescents and emerging adults are averse to responsibility (Arnett, 2000), and there is widespread concern about a lack of development of responsibility in the United States (Bacevich, 2008; Kolbert, 2012; Trzesniewki & Donnellan, 2010). Household chores have traditionally been seen as an important medium for responsibility development (Goodnow, 1988). However, research shows that American parents have been progressively giving children and adolescents fewer and fewer chores over the last century (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991) and that many current parents place little or no household demands on their children (Ochs & Izquierdo, 2010). This trend has been attributed to increased ambivalence in Western culture about imposing duties on young people and to cultural beliefs that emphasize giving young people choices as a means to the valued goals of cultivating independence and self-motivation (Ochs & Izquierdo, 2010; Weisner, 2002). In fact, some argue that attempting to teach responsibility by requiring young people to do demanding tasks can *counteract* the development of responsibility

(Hellison & Parker, 2001). Little research, however, has been aimed at understanding the processes through which responsibility develops and how adults support these processes. Within the context of Western cultural beliefs, the question might be framed as: How can youth learn to *want to* take on demanding obligations?

Organized youth development programs (such as leadership, arts, and technology programs) are an important context for teens to develop responsibility—and for researchers to learn how it can develop. An exploratory study suggested that youth in programs develop a sense of responsibility through a sequence of facing demanding expectations—and then sticking with and fulfilling them (Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009). Adult program leaders appeared to play a role in supporting this development process by setting high standards for youth's work. The current qualitative study sought to better understand the elements of this sequence and how leaders support it. Our research strategy was to examine how responsibility develops within existing youth development programs run by experienced professionals.

RESPONSIBILITY AND HOW IT DEVELOPS

Responsibility has been defined as the character trait of being someone who follows through with and completes obligations (Winter, 1992). Although

it takes somewhat different forms in different cultures, responsibility is valued across cultural groups (Weisner, 2002). Young people's acquisition of responsibility is crucial to the functioning of a society (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Putnam, 2000). Responsibility and related dispositions (like dependability and conscientiousness) are also found to have strong consistent associations with individuals' academic achievement (Noftle & Robins, 2007), productivity at work (Friedman, Kern, & Reynolds, 2010; Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002), positive health behaviors (Bogg & Roberts, 2004), and lower rates of antisocial behavior (Saulsman & Page, 2004).

Recent research suggests that people develop responsibility, not surprisingly, through experiences of fulfilling tasks and obligations (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005). People "become responsible by successfully and repeatedly carrying out responsibilities" (Wood et al., 2009, p. 296). This process appears to be facilitated by structured expectations within institutions and relationships. In a longitudinal study, students entering vocational training institutions that had structured expectations reported greater increases in conscientiousness over time compared to a matched population of university students who did not experience similar expectations in their educational settings (Ludtke, Roberts, Trautwein, & Nagy, 2011). Social roles are a sociological mechanism that provides structured behavioral expectations, and indeed, research indicates that acquiring a role is related to increases in measures of responsibility. Longitudinal studies of early adulthood find that getting married (Roberts & Bogg, 2004) and getting a job (Roberts, 1997; Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003) are associated with increases in generalized conscientiousness.

Research also suggests that becoming a responsible adult requires experiences of progressively taking on larger and more challenging obligations. Anthropologists have long observed how societies that are effective in cultivating responsibility engage children and youth in a progression of increasingly difficult roles that gradually prepare them for the roles of adulthood (Benedict, 1938; Ochs & Izquierdo, 2010). Longitudinal research on young adults in the United States indicates that the impact of getting a job on conscientiousness is strongest when the job involves new and more demanding obligations (Roberts et al., 2003). Successfully fulfilling new, harder obligations, it is theorized, builds skills while also reinforcing and expanding a person's conception of him- or herself as responsible.

If society needs young people to develop responsibility, then an important question becomes: how can youth be induced or enticed into taking on new and increasingly demanding obligations? Roberts and colleagues argue that voluntary "social investment" in an obligation or role is important to the process of developing responsibility (Roberts & Wood, 2006; Roberts et al., 2005). Consistent with this, research shows that variables related to investment, like commitment and emotional attachment to a role, are related to increases in responsibility (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007). Other scholars, however, have argued that social control, not voluntariness, is what gets people to fulfill obligations and thus develop responsibility (Sampson & Laub, 1992). This suggests that youth might better learn responsibility by being assigned or pressured into carrying out obligations. Research is needed to better examine the roles of personal volition and social control in responsibility development.

ORGANIZED PROGRAMS AS CONTEXTS FOR RESPONSIBILITY DEVELOPMENT

Helping youth develop responsibility is a goal of many organized programs for adolescents (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), and most programs provide affordances that might facilitate this goal. Participation in most after-school programs is voluntary and experienced as intrinsically motivating, yet at the same time program activities are typically structured and demanding (Larson, 2000, 2011). In many programs, youth take on defined roles that entail structured expectations (e.g., committee chair, stage manager, treasurer). In programs for high-school aged youth, participants often work on projects that require dealing with difficult real-world demands (Heath, 1999).

Wood, Larson, and Brown's research (2009) began to identify youth's processes of responsibility development within programs. Because the current work builds on Wood et al.'s findings, we describe them in some detail. It was an exploratory study of positive development in 11 programs that served ethnically diverse youth. Youth and program leaders were interviewed at multiple points over a natural period of program activities.

Consistent with theory on responsibility development, youth in that study reported coming to see themselves as more responsible through fulfilling structured program roles, duties, and obligations. In the three programs in which the most youth reported responsibility development, these demands were found to have a higher degree of *a*

priori structure than in the other eight programs: "There were rules, deadlines, and ways of doing things, set in advance, that needed to be followed" (Wood et al., 2009, p. 304). However, because the study was not designed to examine responsibility, it provided limited information about the processes over the sequence of youth's experiences, starting with why youth initially accepted these obligations.

A provocative discovery was that, once youth took on the obligations, some reported that their roles became onerous and stressful. They had to work long hours, meet tight schedules, or sacrifice time with friends. But it was not clear how universal this stress was, or how much of an obstacle it was to youth completing their obligations. Some youth did persevere and fulfill their obligations. When explaining why they had done so, they cited three main reasons, all of which dealt with anticipated costs: They did not want to tarnish their self-concept as someone who fulfills obligations; they wanted to meet leaders' expectations and not negatively impact others; and they wanted to avoid adverse consequences on future goals (e.g., not being chosen for a future role). The centrality of consequences suggests a strong element of social control, particularly in contexts that had a high degree of *a priori* rules, duties, and expectations. Yet youth described their perseverance as voluntary. This suggests a need to examine whether agency and social control may co-act in some way. Another critical question is whether and how youth's increased sense of responsibility in the program might transfer to outside contexts, such as home or school.

Additional questions concern the role of program leaders in creating conditions for youth's responsibility development. It is often recommended that leaders challenge youth and hold them to high expectations (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gambone & Arbreton, 1997). The leaders in Wood et al.'s (2009) three programs in which the most youth reported developing responsibility not only set higher expectations than other leaders, they held youth accountable to them. Compared with leaders in the other programs they reported being more firm and unbending. Yet in implementing a program model aimed at developing responsibility, Hellison and Parker (2001) found that youth must be given choice and agency at the same time they are facing increasingly demanding responsibilities. Wood et al. concluded their study by calling for further discovery research on how successful program leaders "balance the seemingly incongruent task" of setting and enforcing high expectations, with providing support, and cultivating youth's experience of ownership and agency (Wood et al., 2009, p. 307).

THIS STUDY

The current research is aimed at advancing grounded theory about responsibility development within the context of youth programs. Our objective was to examine processes across the full sequence of adolescents' experiences as they take on demanding obligations and attempt to adhere to them. What are youth's experiences of agency, pressure, and strain? How might agency and social control co-act? Do youth and parents report changes in youth's behavior beyond the program, at home and in other settings? We also examine leaders' role in facilitating the sequence. How do effective leaders enforce high expectations yet also provide support that helps youth complete expectations? We employed qualitative interviews because we wanted to understand these *complex processes in context as they were experienced and enacted by those involved* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Valach, Young, & Lyman, 2002).

Given the changing demographics of young people in the United States, we selected two of the four programs in this study to be ones that primarily served Latino youth. This was performed to address a gaping hole in research on positive development and program experiences among Latino teens (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012). Latinos represent over one-fifth (22%) of the under-18 population, a percentage that will continue to grow (Fry & Passel, 2009).

The data for this investigation came from an interview study aimed at understanding different types of youth development in programs (including development of emotional skills, strategic thinking, and changes in relationship with parents). To examine responsibility development, we focused principally on the data from participants in the program setting—youth and leaders—but also include data from parents on their perceptions of whether changes in youth's responsibility transferred from program to home.

METHODS

Programs

The four programs selected for the research all have the goal of facilitating adolescents' development, including development of responsibility.

Because the research aimed to understand developmental processes, we chose established programs with experienced staff, in which these processes might be more readily be observed. In all of the programs, youth worked on projects and had other responsibilities, in several cases responsibilities within the context of a larger youth center. *Unified Youth* (all names of programs, youth and leaders are pseudonyms) is a program in small community center. Members created public service announcements and planned events for youth and adults in a rural community. At the *Boys and Girls Club* in Celina (a medium size rural town), the teenage members planned and led community service events, as well as taking responsibilities within the larger club. *Community House* is an urban neighborhood center for children, youth and families, and most of the youth we interviewed participated in a program offering in which they created a magazine (a few additional youth came from a science program). *The Station* was a municipality-funded suburban youth center and we interviewed high-school-aged youth who were members of the youth council, organized community events, or had roles as staff supervising middle-school-aged youth at the center.

All programs are nonprofit and serve low-to-middle–income high-school-aged youth. Two programs, Unified Youth and Community House, primarily served Latino teens. The Station served an ethnically diverse population whereas most youth at the Boys and Girls Club were African American.

Procedures

Data collection occurred at the end of the school year, when youth had been in the program for a full program cycle. Staff at each program were asked to recruit a representative sample of youth and parents for the interviews. Their instructions were to select youth who had participated for the year and were representative of the program's membership in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and length of prior participation in the program.

Selected youth were randomly assigned to be interviewed with one of two interview protocols. Protocol B included the questions that focused on responsibility development, and the youth receiving this protocol constitute the main youth sample. Some material pertinent to the processes of responsibility developmental also came up among youth administered Protocol A, so some passages from these youth have been used as supplemental data, as described below.

We had only one interview protocol for the leaders and one for the parents. Interviews with youth and leaders were conducted in English; those with parents were conducted in either English or Spanish. Interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed.

Sample

Participants in the interviews were 38 youth, 8 program leaders, and 21 parents of youth. The primary sample of youth for the analyses was the 20 who responded to the responsibility question set (in Protocol B). They ranged in age from 13 to 18 years ($M = 15.4$ years); 60% had been in the program for more than one year. This subsample included girls (53%) and boys (47%) and was ethnically diverse (68% Latino, primarily Mexican; 16% African American; 16% European American). As a proxy for socioeconomic status (SES), youth were asked how much education each parent had completed. Over one quarter of youth in the subsample reported that their parents had not completed high school (27% mothers, 31% fathers), a third to two-fifths had a high school diploma or equivalent (40% mothers, 31% fathers), and the remainder had an associate's degree (13% mothers, 8% fathers), college degree (0% mothers, 8% fathers), or a master's or doctoral-level degree (20% mothers, 23% fathers). The full sample of youth ($N = 38$) was similar on demographics (age range: 12–18 years, $M = 15.0$ years; 55% girls; 67% Latino, 19% African American, 11% European American; 18% mothers and 21% fathers had not completed high school; 33% mothers, 48% mothers and 38% of fathers had a postsecondary degree).

We interviewed the principal leaders who had contact with youth at each site (three at Community House, one at The Station, and two at each of the other sites). They had a range of 4–27 years ($M = 14.0$) of experience working in youth programs. Although we did not ask for ages, all appeared to be in their 30s or 40s. All but one was full-time paid staff.

The 21 parents were primarily mothers (90%). Their age range was 33–61 ($M = 42.4$ years); 45% were Latino, 35% African American, and 20% European American. Two thirds had been born in the United States and one-third in a Latin American country (primarily Mexico). Parents self-reported their education as: less than high school (5%), high school diploma or equivalent (40%), associate's degree (40%), 4-year degree (5%), or master's degree (10%). Parents reported the fam-

ily's average household income (before taxes) as ranging from under $10,000 (two families) to over $60,000 (four families); median family income was around $30,000.

Interview Protocols

Protocols for youth, parents, and leaders contained structured open-ended questions. They were designed to encourage interviewers to probe and follow up on experiences described by interviewees.

The questions for youth on responsibility development (in Protocol B) focused on experiences related to the sequence of actions surrounding youth's taking on and following through on roles and obligations. These questions asked youth to identify the largest role or set of obligations they had in the program, how they obtained them, their experiences (e.g., "Were these new or more demanding responsibilities or pretty much the same?"; "Did your commitment waver or change over time?"; "Was it difficult sticking with these responsibilities?"; "What made you stick with them?"), and whether carrying these responsibilities influenced their self-concept and behavior in different contexts (e.g., at home). The 18 youth interviewed with Protocol A provided data pertinent to the sequence of responsibility development in response to questions about the projects they worked on, the role of leaders, peer interactions, and causes of emotions in the program.

Leaders were asked questions about their goals and planning for the program, their expectations for youth, different situations with youth, and how they supported youth's work. For most questions, they were asked to provide examples of recent situations. A focal question, based on prior research findings, was: "Program staff sometimes play a balancing act between: setting and holding firm to high expectations and adjusting to what youth are able and willing to do. What strategies do you use to balance these two? Can you give me examples?"

Parents were asked questions about how youth's experiences in the program transferred to other settings like home and school (e.g., "Have you seen any changes in [child] as a result of being in the program?"; "How has your child's involvement in [program] affected his or her behavior at home?").

Analyses

The goal of the analyses was to understand youth's experiences across the sequence of responsibility development, how leaders supported it, and par-

ents' perceptions of whether youth's experiences transferred beyond the program. A team of three researchers conducted multiple rounds of coding, following grounded theory and related methodologies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The three jointly constructed coding schemes and compared coding at each round to ensure fidelity. Although the sample size was not large enough to permit comparison between ethnic groups, we were attentive to possible differences.

Iterative coding of the youth interviews led to the identification of a four-part cycle of responsibility development. These four parts or "steps" follow the sequence of taking on and completing obligations. After identifying these steps, we conducted open coding and analysis of the data pertinent to each step to identify subthemes reflective of the processes youth experienced. The main analyses focused on the data from the 20 youth who responded to interview protocol B, but we added pertinent data from the additional 18 youth at the last stage of analysis to help more fully illuminate the substance and variations within the subthemes. Analysis of the parent data focused solely on the fourth step in the cycle (changes in youth's self-concept and behavior) and involved identifying subthemes pertinent to that step.

Analysis of the leader data was conducted after the analysis of youth and parent data. Our objective was to focus on how leaders supported the cycle of learning described by youth. Leaders reported playing many roles, including structuring the program, as well as coaching, role modeling, and supporting youth's work as it proceeded. We report only leader practices that were described across all four programs. The iterative process of open coding and analysis identified three sets of leader practices.

We ended with theoretical analyses aimed at identifying integrative issues, concepts, and processes. This included relating the findings to prior theory and research.

RESULTS

Youth's Cycle of Developing Responsibility

The analyses identified four parts or steps in youth's cycle of learning and suggested the processes within each step.

Step 1: Taking on a new role or obligations. Youth described an initial step at which they agreed to take on obligations or a role contain-

ing a set of obligations. Our analysis of this step focused first on the nature of the obligations and then on youth's process of accepting them.

For most of the 20 youth who received the target questions, the obligations were part of a role, such as vice president, youth council member, or mentor. For a number of youth, the obligations involved helping or supervising peers or younger youth in the program. These included "making sure everybody feels welcome" and "giving people stuff to do, organize them and tell them how to do it." Adeline at The Station had a role "helping [younger youth] with their homework, make sure they're staying on task for their allotted homework time." Many youth had roles within a group project (e.g., planning an event, writing an article for a magazine).

A notable finding was that many of the obligations youth described were open-ended. Although the general goals were defined, youth had to figure out how to achieve those goals: the means were not strictly a priori. James, a stage manager at The Station, reported:

I'm the person that people are relying on to keep the show moving, like, I have to monitor the stage while the music is happening and if something goes wrong, it's my job to like, whatever it takes, … like problem solving, but quickly to keep the show going.

Alexis at the Celina Boys and Girls Club described another open-ended situation:

The job I had to do was get everybody organized. That was demanding because you have one person wanting to talk about their nails, one person messing with their MP3 player, one person feeling on their hair, and one person with a nasty attitude.

Alexis had to find a way to get all these youth to focus on a single goal. James, Alexis, and other youth were in roles where they had to come up with solutions as new challenges emerged.

Most youth reported that they accepted their role or responsibilities voluntarily or through a semi-voluntary process. Some described wanting a role and asking to take it. For example, Esmeralda described how she volunteered to be on the Community House Youth Council:

Watching my older peers, the president and the vice president leading, and like throwing parties and a fundraiser—that kind of inspired

me, and I thought maybe I wanna do that too, maybe I wanna show that I can plan an event and stuff like that.

Other youth volunteered when someone was needed to fill a role. Some described choosing their role off a menu of options from which they *had* to choose one. Youth at Community House were required to take a role in helping produce *The Voice*, a magazine youth were preparing. Some of the youth at The Station took on roles for which they were paid, but they described the roles they had as something they had wanted. Only three youth reported being assigned or voted into a role without having much say. Carlos recounted that when Unified Youth needed a treasurer, "They chose me, but I said, 'No. It's not a good thing, I don't even know how to do this.'" Nonetheless he was persuaded to accept the role.

Step 2: Youth's ongoing experience of the obligations. Many youth expressed initial excitement with their role or obligations, but at some point nearly all experienced challenges and strain. Some wavered in their commitment to fulfilling the obligations. Analyses identified three elements of their experience at this second step.

First, about half of the 20 youth in the focal sample reported that fulfilling the role was more difficult than they had expected. Demands were bigger or more complex than they had thought, and there were unanticipated challenges that they had to deal with. Damian, at The Station, described the frustration of not being able to complete tasks because he was not getting cooperation from others: "I was supposed to email people and call them, and there was no response." Esmeralda, editor-in-chief of *The Voice*, at Community House, said: "Almost my whole group was like 'This was a lot harder than they thought it would be.'" Some youth reported that it was the open-ended nature of tasks that made them difficult. Debora from Unified Youth was organizing a large public event that required coordinating work with several different adults. She explained: "It wasn't like an English paper where you *know* what you have to do. It was just kind of: 'We need this, we *have* to figure out what's gonna make it better.'"

Second, most youth reported times when they experienced the obligations as onerous: they felt strain, anxiety, or boredom. Many reported times when the work was too hard for them, and they doubted their ability to do it. It made them feel "like I'm dumb" or they felt overwhelmed. Esmeralda,

the editor-in-chief, described occasions when: "My head's like, 'Oh wait, I don't know what I'm supposed to do." Lilia who was helping Debora organize the event at Unified Youth said it was "kind of frightening at times." In some cases the strain came from competing demands in youth's lives, like schoolwork and activities with friends.

Third, as a result of this strain, about half of the youth reported wavering in their commitment to fulfilling the obligations. Some youth considered not complying with or quitting their role. After one idea for an article for *The Voice* did not work out, Dahlia at Community House was not motivated to start on another one: "I just, I didn't really want to do it anymore. I just wanted to be done with it." However, Vivian, the adult leader, persuaded her to develop an article on a different topic. Across programs, three of the 20 youth in the focal sample reported that they did not fulfill their obligations; two of these were youth who had been assigned to a role without having any say.

Step 3: Fulfilling obligations. Despite the strain, most youth (17 of the 20) persevered and followed through with their obligations. The analysis identified three main reasons that influenced youth's sticking with and fulfilling the demands. The first two overlap with those identified in the prior study (Wood et al., 2009).

First, a number of youth attributed their fulfilling the obligations to a *pre-existing disposition* in themselves. Completing obligations was part of their self-concept. Even when the demands were more strenuous than expected—or than they had ever experienced before—youth felt they could not back out because it would contradict how they see themselves. As Isabel articulated: "I'm not the kind of person that just backs outta things for no reason because I don't like it." Multiple youth said that they do not like to start things without finishing them. Several youth attributed this disposition to their families. Jack at the Boys and Girls Club explained, "I guess I was just raised to never give up."

Second, youth said they fulfilled the obligations because of the *leaders' high expectations and support*. These expectations appeared to serve as a motivational force in helping youth follow through with obligations. Dahlia described how Vivian's high expectations influenced her: "I think it's good. It pushes me to get things done. It's like a motivation, because if she didn't have any expectations, I wouldn't care." Ana, another teen from Community House, said of Vivian: "I just try to do my best

every time 'cause I know that she knows that I could do like up here [points high]." Youth appreciated being challenged and pushed because it helped them accomplish their goals. Will at The Station explained that he had internalized the high expectations of the leaders: "You feel that you owe it to them to do things right and to do them the way they are expected to be done ... not because necessarily they are always hounding you about it, but just because you want to do it." Asked if this motivation was "guilt," Will was emphatic that it was not—the leaders' expectations were congruent with what he wanted.

Youth reported that leaders provided various types of support to help them meet expectations. They described how leaders helped with ideas, feedback, and encouragement, and by extending a deadline after encountering a problem. The diversity of help suggested that leaders may not need to be as firm and unbending as suggested by the Wood et al. (2009) study. Jack at the Boys and Girls Club described how leaders combined high expectations with providing support: "They always set us up on a pedestal and like, 'This is where you should be and this is what you need to do. If you don't do it, we are going to get you there somehow, some way.'"

The third and most frequent reason youth gave for persevering—a reason less prominent in Wood et al.'s findings—was a sense of *solidarity with and obligation to peers*. They shared the goals of getting the work done well. In describing youth's creation of the *Voice* at Community House, Damian said, "We just work together to accomplish it. If someone doesn't do their picture, the other team helps them take their picture, or helps them review the writing or the letters, or newspaper. We help each other." Similarly Lilia, at Unified Youth, was ready to step in and provide support to other youth: "I just think: 'I got to be there. What if my president can't be there, I have to go take notes and be on top of things just in case she needs anything.'" Youth felt an obligation to provide a safety net for each other.

A corollary of this mutual obligation was that everybody had to do their part. Youth reported holding each other accountable. Not doing your part—social loafing—was not acceptable. Madelyn at the Boys and Girls Club reported:

> Everybody has a role or a part, but then later on it would be like, "Oh we can't do it because of so and so reason." But I'll probably try to push it like, "OK, you should do it for a certain reason."

At The Station, Adeline said, "I think everyone keeps everyone else in check." Thus, although youth reported an ethos of being ready to step in and help each other, there was also an expectation that all do their part.

Across the three explanations for fulfilling obligations, youth's accounts generally communicated a sense of ownership and personal volition that motivated their perseverance. Even when influenced by others, it was because they had internalized expectations and they shared the same goals. But this is not to say their actions were wholly voluntary and self-controlled – youth were responding to obligations and demands of the work. What the data suggest is that personal volition and obligation were not crisply separated; they co-acted.

Step 4: Changes in self and behavior. The final step of the cycle entailed changes in the youth. Youth were asked, "How did carrying these responsibilities change or influence how you view yourself?" Most of the 17 youth who fulfilled their obligations reported that doing so influenced them in positive ways. They saw themselves as more responsible, as well as dependable and mature—dimensions of responsibility. They also felt more capable and confident. A central theme was that carrying out adult-like roles made them feel more responsible, not just in their own eyes, but in the eyes of others: in the reflected self. Caroline, who had served as chair of The Station Youth Council said, "I feel more grown up. I feel more like I can do a lot more than most people think a normal 16-year-old like me can." Esmeralda reported that after fulfilling the demands involved with being editor-in-chief, "I just saw myself as a very responsible person. I thought I could be trusted with a lot of things, and it made me want to stay that way [italics added]. Esmeralda articulates an investment in sustaining the change in how she sees herself and how others see her.

Youth were also asked if fulfilling the obligations influenced how they acted at home or in other parts of their lives. A majority of the 17 youth who fulfilled their obligations reported that it did. Caroline said that "because I know I can do stuff at The Station, I want to take on more at home." Tamara described "cleaning up more at home when I'm not told to." Youth described communicating better with their parents and doing chores voluntarily. They felt that the experience of successfully fulfilling obligations in the program led them to be more organized, confident and responsible at school or take on a more proactive role at home.

Parents were also asked about the program's influence on their sons and daughters, and many of them credited it with increasing the youth's responsibility. They perceived that the program had made their child more diligent, organized, helpful, adult-like, attentive to others, better at communicating, and more trustworthy. A mother from the Boys and Girls Club discussed how she saw a change in her son's attitude toward schoolwork: "He wants to do the work, he wants to figure out how to solve the problem, or he wants to complete the project so he can see the outcome of it." A number of parents reported that their children were more likely to do chores. Parents felt that youth's experience in the program affected not just their children's behavior but their attitude and motivation. For example, a father with two children reported their increased attentiveness and consideration at home after attending The Station.

> They've improved. Like before, they never listened. I would talk to them and they wouldn't listen.... Now they ask me, "What happened, Papi? How can I help you?" I tell them what they should do and they don't get mad or anything now.

It should be cautioned that the changes parents reported were not likely all due to the single, specific cycle of fulfilling obligations that youth described. Some youth had been in the program multiple years. Nonetheless, they appear to be congruent with youth's descriptions of changes.

In sum, these accounts from youth and parents provide initial support that, through the process of taking on roles and obligations and fulfilling them despite obstacles, youth are developing a sense of responsibility that transfers to other contexts. We turn next to an examination of the role of leaders.

Leader Practices that Supported Youth's Cycle of Learning

Analysis of the leader data identified three sets of practices across programs that appeared to facilitate youth's experience of this cycle of learning.

Creating structured but open-ended roles. First, leaders were deliberate in formulating roles for youth that were—as youth described above—structured but open-ended. They created and cultivated roles that had explicit expectations (e.g., planning in advance, making sure meetings start on time, mentoring younger teens), which they communicated to

youth. At the same time, leaders structured roles to allow youth agency in figuring out how to meet the expectations and goals. The leaders helped define the roles but, as expressed by Tyler (a leader at Unified Youth), the roles "put the responsibility back on them." Youth were expected and able to use the power vested in the role to make decisions and solve problems.

Many formal roles were passed on from year to year, so leaders' contribution was to communicate and reinforce the expectations and prerogatives of the role for new incumbents. Other roles were developed ad hoc, yet they contained the same combination of structure and affordance for agency. Matthew at the Celina Boys and Girls Club described sitting down and negotiating with individual youth: "Tell me what you want to do. I'll tell you what I would like for you to do." We hypothesize that this combination of structure and agency helps support youth's motivation in taking on and persevering through the strain of challenging roles.

Balancing high expectations with support. Second, leaders reported a deliberate set of practices that combined setting high expectations with providing tailored support to help youth succeed. This was consistent with what the youth said helped them fulfill their obligations (above). Leaders indicated that they communicated high expectations—they challenged youth. One leader said her goal was to have youth push themselves beyond their comfort zones. Vivian said of the staff at Community House, "We all have high expectations of them. If we know that they could do something, [we] let them know that we know they could do it." Leaders provided expectations and faith in youth, which youth experienced as a motivational force.

Yet, while leaders communicated high expectations, they also monitored youth's work and adjusted these expectations. Vivian explained: "I know. I observe. I watch." As youth experienced strain, leaders sometimes recalibrated where the bar was set. Dylan at The Station described making these adjustments in youth's responsibilities:

We sit down and intentionally discuss this monthly, so then I can maybe meet with people and scale things back like, okay, "You know a lot of members of the [youth board] are looking at revolting here, what do we need to do?"

Other leaders also reported lowering the bar a notch when they saw it was too high or—as in Dylan's example—when youth showed signs of buckling or rebelling. But leaders also adjusted expectations upwards. Dylan went on to describe how he would tell youth: "You know, a lot of the staff have really noticed qualities—you look like you'd be a great leader here—would you be interested in taking on more responsibility and we'll start teaching you those skills?"

Leaders also reported providing support to help youth meet expectations. This corroborates the youth data, except that leaders indicated that it was judicious support—they provided suggestions, encouragement, structures, and reframing that helped youth *when it was needed and in limited amounts.* At the Boys and Girls Club, Amira recounted:

We had a secretary that really couldn't write neatly or really couldn't spell. So she wanted to give it up, but we wouldn't let her. What we did was, you know: "Just take your time and print, and we'll have a dictionary. So while you're in a meeting, just shorthand the word but remember it. Then when you get done with the meeting go get the dictionary, find the real spelling, and just keep going." So we don't let them quit unless they have a reason why. You know: "We wanna help you get through this."

Amira's account provides an illustration of how leaders balance "the seemingly incongruent task" of providing support while holding youth to high expectations (cf. Wood et al., 2009, p. 309). Juanita, from Unified Youth, provided another illustration. Their program had a strong youth-led philosophy, but Juanita was acutely aware that youth were planning at a level they had never done before. Thus, she and her co-leader would sometimes see a need to provide encouragement and suggestions: "OK, we need to focus, let's do this, let's set a schedule and let's do this." Across programs, this support appeared to be contingent on need and it was given judiciously: it was provided in ways that kept agency with the youth.

Leaders appeared to challenge youth to the limits of their abilities, nudging them to act at increasing levels of responsibility. Yet they made adjustments and provided judicious support to help youth have the important experience of succeeding in fulfilling the demands.

Cultivating peer cohesiveness and teamwork. Third, leaders in all programs reinforced

youth's shared ownership and collective agency. They described encouraging youth to "form a cohesive group" or "team" in which they are accountable to each other for the work they do. Matthew reported telling youth at the Boys and Girls Club that "you have to do what the group says." Dylan encouraged youth to think of themselves as a team that identifies with "The Station way of doing things," which included youth-developed norms about mutual accountability. Dylan also described matching up youth with similar interests to create partnerships. When possible he partnered experienced and novice youth, so the novice could learn. The idea that youth differ was part of the message leaders tried to convey. Tyler reported encouraging the Unified Youth to "form a cohesive group that recognizes strengths and weaknesses and capitalizes on the strengths of people; and don't ignore the weaknesses." This included recognizing that, for some team members, this means "relying on them for certain areas but maybe not other areas." Across programs, leaders appealed to youth to be "role models" to other youth by following through with obligations and encouraging them to do the same.

In sum, leaders appeared to facilitate youth's taking on and following through with incrementally more challenging obligations by creating demanding open-ended roles, providing judicious assistance, and cultivating a sense of mutual ownership and obligation among youth.

DISCUSSION

How can adolescents develop responsibility? This study provides empirically based theory about how this happens within American organized programs, a context in which youth's participation is voluntary. Systematic analysis of accounts from youth and leaders in four programs suggest processes through which most youth increased their sense of responsibility. Limits of the study must be kept in mind: the sample was small; the methods were those of theory development, not theory testing. We first discuss the processes youth described, then highlight two important elements of these processes, and lastly examine the leaders' roles in supporting these processes.

Youth's Cycle of Responsibility Development

Youth's accounts of their experiences suggested that they developed increased responsibility through a four-part cycle. These findings provided

a much fuller picture of the underlying processes than was obtained in a prior study (Wood et al., 2009). In the first step of the cycle youth took on obligations, often in the form of a structured role. The data showed that this was most often a voluntary or semi-voluntary process. Second, as youth got into the work challenge and strain were a normative experience. Most reported occasions when the obligations were onerous and half reported wavering in their commitment to fulfilling them. Third, despite the challenges and strain, nearly all youth were motivated to persevere and fulfill the obligations. They attributed this perseverance to three sources: a pre-existing disposition in themselves to follow through on obligations, their internalization of leaders' high expectations and support, and a sense of solidarity with and obligation to their peers. Finally, youth reported that their experiences of fulfilling the obligations made them feel more responsible and engage in more responsible actions in other contexts of their lives. Parents also reported that the programs made youth more likely to voluntarily take on new roles and fulfill obligations at home and school.

Across this cycle, youth's participation appeared to be *both* voluntary and influenced by social controls. Youth's accounts suggested that their experiences of agency and social controls were not directly in conflict, they often co-acted. For example, they described the leaders' high expectations, not as a compromise of their own agency, but as a positive motivational force that helped them keep going and meet expectations. Most youth used language suggesting that they experienced substantial volition at Step 1, in accepting a role or obligations, at Step 3, in deciding to follow through with them, and at Step 4 in becoming more responsible in other settings. The findings suggest that under the right conditions, youth learn to voluntarily take on roles that entail obligations and social controls. We next highlight two elements in the cycle that we see as significant theoretical contributions, giving attention to how these also illustrate co-action.

The Role of Roles

Social roles appeared be a frequent mediating mechanism in this cycle of responsibility development. Sociologists recognize that roles structure, constrain, and control behavior (i.e., they come with obligations), but they also provide privileges and powers that permit freedom and agency in how these obligations are performed (Newman & Newman, 2007). In the four programs, leaders

helped structure meaningful roles for youth (council member, editor, mentor) and youth voluntarily accepted these obligations. Youth then exercised the powers of the roles to fulfill the obligations, sometimes in original ways. Social control and agency co-acted.

In sociological theory, roles are also seen as an important medium of socialization. A person's performance of increasingly varied and demanding roles helps him or her develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Brim, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition, a person's self-concept is altered through reflected images of the self-enacting the role (Berger, 1963; Mead, 1967). Both processes appeared to be at work in the four programs. Youth's successful performance of the roles appeared to help them gain skills for being more organized, diligent, and attentive to others. Further, we suggest this "looking-glass" process—observing themselves deliberately persevering through challenge and strain—helped youth view themselves as more "grown up," mature, self-confident, and responsible. Youth learned not just behavior; they appeared to internalize the motivations behind responsible behavior. As Esmeralda reported, "I want to stay that way." She wanted to reproduce her experience of this new more responsible self. Successful voluntary participation in a role, we suggest, can influence youth to internalize a set of behaviors, dispositions, and self-conceptions that lead them to *want to* take on new responsibilities and roles in the future.

The Power of Peers

A second important new finding was the prominent role of peers in the cycle of responsibility development. Peers appeared to serve a dual function. First, many youth reported that experiences of solidarity with peers positively motivated their fulfillment of obligations. They described collective investment in their work; some reported being ready to fill in for others if they faltered. Psychologists tend to think of agency and motivation as residing in the individual, yet research suggests that it can reside in a group (Graham & Taylor, 2002; Miller, 2003). These youth's experience of agency in their work appeared to be shared. Self and other were not separate; they were connected.

At the same time, this connection to peers provided social control. Youth reported experiencing mutual obligation—an ethos of everyone doing their part. Roles come with pressure from others in the social context to live up to role expectations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This can include internalized pressure to live up to the reflected self-concept (Berger, 1963).

Thus, youth's shared investment may have simultaneously supported youth's experience of agency and social control. Although much research documents the negative influence of peers, increasing research indicates that under the right conditions peer processes can be a powerful force in positive development (Larson, Jensen, Kang, Griffith, & Rompala, 2012).

How Program Leaders Support Youth's Responsibility Development

The program leaders, these data suggest, were deliberate in providing ongoing scaffolding for youth to engage in the cycle of responsibility development. They were not firm and unbending (as suggested by Wood et al., 2009); they played a nuanced and dynamic role. *First*, they helped shape roles for youth that served as a mediating mechanism—that presented youth with structured obligations but also latitude for exercising agency and making decisions. *Second*, as youth's work proceeded, the leaders balanced communicating high expectations with judiciously adjusting expectations and providing support. They described an ongoing process of calibrating and recalibrating these expectations (for example, to accommodate unforeseen difficulties; also to expand a youth's role when appropriate). Leaders also provided suggestions, encouragement, and reframing when needed to help youth keep going through demanding tasks and experience success in fulfilling their responsibilities. *Third*, leaders cultivated collective peer ownership and mutual accountability. This appeared to reinforce the powerful dual function of peers as a source of motivation and social control. All three of these forms of scaffolding involved leaders tailoring their actions to the ongoing situations in youth's work.

Although preliminary, these findings have important implications for youth practice. Consistent with research on expertise in other fields of practice (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006; Sternberg, 1998), they suggest that the work of supporting youth's development involves nuanced skills for responding to complex situations in ways that balance divergent goals. To support youth's responsibility development, this appears to include skills for creating (and modifying) roles for youth that balance the right amounts of challenge

and agency; also skills for maintaining a dynamic balance of high expectations and support (e.g., knowing when to push and when to provide help). Cultivating collective peer agency involves knowing when and how to ensure that youth's collective attention leads in the direction of responsibility development, not deviancy training (cf. Dodge, Lansford, & Dishion, 2006). The expertise entailed in these skills needs to be better understood and incorporated into professional development of youth program leaders.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

These preliminary findings have the strength of being grounded in the experiences and actions of youth and leaders in context. They also begin to suggest theory about how different processes fit together in producing responsibility development. Yet the findings are also limited by the study's cross-sectional design, small sample size, and reliance on narrative accounts.

We suggest several directions for future research. First, longitudinal mixed-methods research is needed to further explicate and test how the processes described here play out over time. Among many questions, an important one is how youth's multiple experiences with roles (both inside and outside the program) might combine to provide a ladder for youth's development of increased responsibility (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hellison & Parker, 2001).

Second, it is critical to examine differences in these processes, among youth and among programs. The findings here suggest a singular cycle, but it would be informative to examine how trajectories might differ for youth who enter a program without an initial disposition toward responsibility, are assigned to roles involuntarily, do not receive support when a role becomes too difficult, or do not experience peer solidarity? Differences in program design and leaders' skills should also be examined. In short, what are the circumstances—for a youth or in a program—in which this cycle of learning is successful or fails to occur?

A third set of important questions concerns the role of culture in supporting this cycle. For example, in this research, virtually all youth who reported peer solidarity as a reason for their fulfilling obligations were Latino. This finding may reflect program-level differences but may also result from cultural processes. Cooperation among peers had been identified as an important norm of Latino cultures (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999; Knight,

Cota, & Bernal, 1993), and collectivism is recognized as a Latino cultural norm (Cauce & Demenech-Rodriguez, 2002). Might this be a significant cultural asset that contributes to responsibility development? Because our sample size was too small to allow systematic ethnic group comparisons, future research is needed to address this question.

CONCLUSION

This theory-building research suggests how a virtuous cycle of interactions between program structures, youth's agency, peers, and leaders can engender processes of responsibility development within youth programs. Leaders create program structures in which youth experience agency over demanding roles; and they manage conditions so that youth's motivation is sustained and youth are able to fulfill the role demands. Peer groups play a dual role of providing a sense of solidarity, which increases motivation and reciprocal assistance, while also imposing a sense of mutual accountability. Youth's voluntary, agentic participation in this virtuous cycle leads them to internalize a positive reflected self-concept—of self as responsible in relationship to others—that can motivate voluntary responsible behavior in other contexts of their lives, like home and school.

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