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The Important (But Neglected) Developmental Value of Roles: Findings From Youth Programs

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Developmental theory historically viewed demanding roles (at home, job) as important developmental contexts. However, adolescents' participation in these roles has fallen. This qualitative research examined role experiences in United States youth development programs. A central question among others was, "How can youth experience internal motivation fulfilling externally imposed role obligations?" We interviewed 73 youth with substantive work roles (e.g., Leader, Reporter, and Teacher) in 13 arts, science-technology, and leadership programs. Youth (51% female) were 14- to 18-years-old and ethnically diverse. We used grounded-theory methods suited to understanding youth's active learning processes in context. Findings illuminated youth's experiences in 4 important transactions or "steps." Youth: (a) accepted roles based on personal goals, (b) encountered difficult challenges similar to adult roles (e.g., conflicting viewpoints, role strain), (c) drew on resources to overcome challenges and fulfill role demands, and (d) learned through these experiences. Across these steps, findings suggested 3 powerful development processes. First, youth experienced multiple sources of internal motivation (e.g., agency within roles, personal and social investment, and "good pressure"), which fostered high engagement in role performance and learning. Second, experiences grappling with and fulfilling difficult role demands helped youth build important competencies for action (e.g., strategic thinking, perseverance). Third, youth's experience of accountability to others served as a powerful driver of responsibility development: Because youth were invested, they took ownership of obligations to others and learned responsive modes of thinking and acting, which they transferred to family, school, and elsewhere. We propose that teens would benefit from more opportunities for role experiences like these.

Keywords: youth development programs, social roles, youth practice, social-emotional development, moral development

In classical developmental theory, roles were viewed as important vehicles of development and socialization. Young people's experiences holding meaningful substantive roles—on the farm,

caring for children, on a job—were seen to provide valuable opportunities for social-emotional learning, identity development, and socialization into society (Barker & Wright, 1955; Coleman et al., 1974; Mead, 1934). This theory influenced Bronfenbrenner (1979) to include roles as one of three "building blocks" of the microsystem (with relationships and activities). Bronfenbrenner argued that "roles have a magiclike power to alter how a person is treated, how she acts" (p. 6), and that young people develop through active "participation in an ever-broadening role repertoire" (p. 104). Studies find that having roles in school is related to increased prosocial behavior (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979) and longitudinal research suggests that having a job as a teen contributes to positive functioning in adult roles (Mortimer, 2003; Staff & Mortimer, 2008).

Despite theory and research supporting the value of roles, many postindustrial societies have been moving in the opposite direction. Adolescents spend less time on household responsibilities and paid jobs than teens in traditional societies (Larson & Verma, 1999; Schlegel & Barry, 1991). In the United States, across the past century teens have had progressively fewer household roles (Goldscheider & Waite, 1993; Hofferth, 2009) and in recent decades

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fewer paid jobs (Morisi, 2017). Hence, they have less opportunity to gain the developmental benefits that roles might provide. One reason for these trends may be that young people's work is less needed than in the past (Morrison, 2017). They may also be because of growing ambivalence in Western culture about placing obligations on adolescents and new beliefs that emphasize allowing teens choice and supporting their development of autonomy and self-motivation (Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009; Twenge & Park, 2017). However, are there conditions in which teens are motivated to take roles? If so, what keeps them motivated and how do these roles facilitate growth and learning?

Youth development programs in the United States are settings in which teens hold substantive roles (Salusky et al., 2014), so they are a promising context to examine role processes. Youth programs include extracurricular school activities and community-based programs in which adolescents meet on a regular schedule to participate in activities, such as arts, technology, and leadership activities, under the supervision of adult staff. Youth development programs are widespread in the United States: 83% of 12- to 17-year-olds report participating in at least one program or extracurricular activity in the past year (Moore, Hatcher, Vandivere, & Brown, 2000). United States programs have a shared institutional philosophy that emphasizes youth decision-making, supportive relationships, and empowering participants as agents of development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2013). Members take roles such as activity leaders, cameraperson, or committee chair, which may provide special opportunities for these agentic learning processes.

The goal of this research was to examine adolescents' experiences holding substantive roles in youth programs. We wanted to understand program roles as opportunity structures or "developmental systems" (Lerner & Tolan, 2016) that facilitate processes of positive development. We ask what motivates youth to accept roles, how they respond when they encounter difficult demands, and how role experiences facilitate developmental change. Ultimately, we are concerned with the applied goal of understanding how to make roles function successfully to facilitate development. Given limited prior research, we sought to build grounded theory about these processes using methods of qualitative research (National Institutes of Mental Health Consortium of Editors on Development & Psychopathology, 1999). We analyzed interview data collected from 14–18-year-old youth holding roles in diverse programs.

Literature Review

Role Theory

Although many definitions have been provided for "roles," there is general consensus on the basics. Roles are structures. A role is a set of socially constructed or coconstructed norms and expectations placed upon the role occupant. Roles typically occur within institutional contexts (e.g., a family or organization) and are organized around functions (Biddle, 1986; Newman & Newman, 2016). By "substantive roles" we refer to roles where the expectations include obligations to perform work and fulfill specific functions.

The obligations of roles are theorized to be central active ingredients that drive developmental change. Development occurs

through a person encountering new role demands, learning to address them, and successfully fulfilling expectations (Biddle & Thomas, 1966; Roberts & Davis, 2016). The experience of success in the role provides positive reflected images (from self and others) of oneself effectively responding to social needs, which leads to internalization of role behavior (Burke, 1991; Mead, 1934).

Role theory may be helpful in suggesting what could motivate teens to accept role obligations. Sieber (1974) posited that in addition to duties: "Every role carries with it certain rights . . . and these serve as inducements for recruitment to roles and . . . the continuation of role performance." The role holder is given a mandate (within limits) to exercise agency in how they fulfill the role obligations and functions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966); and experiencing agency is an established contributor to internal motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

However, can these opportunities for agency be structured in ways that sustain teens' motivation? Research with adults shows that role obligations can be difficult and stressful. Adult work roles impose social controls, subject role holders to conflicting pressures, and may create role overload (Biddle, 1979; Gross, McEachern, & Mason, 1966). These can undermine role occupants' experience of agency and internal motivation (Ashforth, 2001). Do teens' roles in programs present similar stressful demands and do they undermine motivation?

Recent research with adults suggests another type of internal motivation that may support perseverance through difficult role demands: social investment. Roberts and colleagues theorize that being socially and psychologically invested in a role is an important motivator of both role perseverance and developmental change (Roberts & Wood, 2006). They found that young adults with greater investment in their jobs showed longitudinal increases in conscientiousness and emotional stability (Hudson, Roberts, & Lodi-Smith, 2012; Roberts & Davis, 2016). Might teens' program roles engender a level of investment that supports similar developmental change?

Youth Programs as Contexts for Role Experiences

Youth programs provide favorable conditions for role experiences. They support motivation: Adolescents' participation in programs is voluntary and high-quality programs have a motivating social environment (e.g., caring relationships) and activity environment (e.g., support for youth agency; Larson, McGovern, & Orson, in press). Further, professional program leaders are trained to facilitate youth-driven learning experiences (Smith, McGovern, Larson, Hillaker, & Peck, 2016). In programs for high-school-aged teens, roles are often situated within long-term group projects (e.g., creating a film, planning an event; Larson & Angus, 2011).

We observed the possible significance of program roles in a pilot study focused on the development of responsibility. We asked 20 teens in four programs to describe their experiences with program "responsibilities and roles." Their accounts suggested that: youth took roles seriously, roles could be demanding, and youth learned from them (Salusky et al., 2014). We also discovered critical unasked questions, for example, about youth's role investment, peer dynamics, and developmental processes. Although the pilot's small size limited power for detecting robust patterns, a useful finding was discovery of four "steps" in youth's role experiences that appeared to represent consequential transac-

tions between the youth and role. The pilot (and role theory) also suggested preliminary focal research questions for each step, briefly summarized here.

Step 1: Taking on a role. One set of focal questions deals with how voluntarily youth obtain roles. Staff's assignment of youth to roles may compromise their motivation (Parker & Hellison, 2001). Whether and why people want a role can be important (Ashforth, 2001). Youth in the pilot reported wanting their roles but the specific choice processes were unclear.

Step 2: Experiencing role demands. Another set of questions is whether program roles confront youth with the kinds of difficulties found in adult roles (e.g., conflicting pressures, unexpected obligations) and how this affects them? Some pilot youth reported role strain, but information on specific role demands was incomplete. Given U.S. youth's limited experience with substantive roles, we wanted to understand their experiences dealing with role obligations.

Step 3: Fulfilling role demands. Experiencing high role demands and strain is not necessarily a bad thing if people are motivated and able to overcome them (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005). In the pilot, most youth reported fulfilling their responsibilities or roles. Focal questions include: If roles become challenging and stressful, how are youth able to stick with them and fulfill the obligations? What resources do they draw on? How might personal investment, program leaders, or peers help youth overcome challenges?

Step 4: Processes of developmental change. Youth in the pilot study reported that role experiences led to developmental change, including changes that transferred to contexts beyond the program. Fuller data are needed on what youth learn and how learning and transfer occurs. Little research has examined how roles lead to developmental change for adults, let alone teens.

This Study

We used these four steps and focal questions as a starting place for examining youth's role experiences. Our goal was learning how roles function as opportunity structures to support developmental processes—also any difficulties that might interfere with these processes. An overarching question across steps was how *externally imposed role obligations* support or interfere with youth's *internal experiences* of the role (e.g., their motivation, experiences of agency). Bronfenbrenner (1989) suggests that development is most likely when there is a "synergistic" relationship between the environment and person. We asked whether program roles created this synergy between role demands and youth's internal experience.

We conducted the study recognizing that role experiences are complex and varied. Performing a role can involve multilayered transactions with supervisors, colleagues, and people one is serving (Biddle, 1986). Experiences may vary by the role, program context, and other factors. We viewed sensitivity to this complexity as vital to examining role experiences. Because youth are central actors in role processes, we also felt it important to study these experiences from their viewpoint—as they took on, enacted, and learned from roles. Qualitative methods are well-suited to studying these active developmental experiences in complex, varied contexts (Lerner & Tolan, 2016). (Qualitative methods are not suited to controlled study of individual differences, so that was not

a goal). While recognizing this complexity, our main aim was looking for similarities across experiences in how roles facilitate youth's development.

Method

Interviews for this study were conducted with 73 high-school-age teens who had substantive roles within 13 community and school-based youth development programs.

Program Selection and Procedures

These data were collected as part of a multicomponent study of developmental processes in youth programs. We selected programs that met criteria associated with program quality (e.g., experienced staff, low youth turnover, at least 100 contact hours) and other characteristics (e.g., served primarily low- and middle-income families, mixed gender). Programs were recruited from three research locations in the Midwestern United States: Chicago, Central Illinois, and Minneapolis (4–5 programs each). Reflecting the larger study's goals, we recruited seven programs that served primarily Latinx adolescents (2–3 from each location). All programs were project-based; we obtained a mix of arts, leadership, and science-technology from each location (Griffith & Larson, 2016).

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved procedures (Institution = University of Illinois, project title = Pathways Project/Proyecto Caminos: Youth Programs and Families, IRB protocol number = 11663), a research team member presented information about the study to youth in the program and gave them a parent information letter (in English and Spanish) that described the study and gave instructions for opting youth out of the study; youth assent was also obtained. Participants received modest monetary incentives for each interview.

The interviewed youth were a subset of program youth in the programs and in the larger study. The full sample ($n = 355$; 94.4% of youth in the 13 programs) completed quantitative questionnaires at four time points across the program cycle (typically a school year). A subset of these youth ($n = 54$; the "prospective sample") took part in four individual interviews (Times 1–4) and another subset ($n = 54$; the "retrospective sample") took part in a single interview at the end of the program cycle (Time 4). Interviewees were selected based on their questionnaire data using purposive quota selection (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) with the goal of obtaining a sample with 8–12 youth per program that was balanced in terms of gender; mirrored each programs' membership (e.g., ethnicity, years of program experience); and (consistent with larger study goals) reflected different levels of parental support (prospective sample) and responsibility development (retrospective sample). Comparisons of the 108 youth in the interview sample with other study participants indicated no significant differences in gender, age, ethnicity, and years in program. The interview questions about roles were asked of the prospective sample at Time 2 and the retrospective sample at Time 4.

Participants

The 73 teens (37 girls, 36 boys) in the analytic sample for this article consisted of youth in the interview samples who reported

holding substantive roles and were within the age range of 14–18 years ($M = 15.79$, $SD = 1.20$). These 73 youth were ethnically diverse (39.7% Latino/a, 35.6% African American or Black, 21.9% European American, and 2.7% other ethnicities). On average, they had been in the program for about a year and a half ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 1.51$). The 73 did not differ significantly from other interviewed youth ($N = 35$) in age, gender, ethnicity/race, or years in the program.

Interview Questions About Role Experiences

The interview protocol included 40 structured questions and probes that asked about youth's experiences with a program role. Items addressed the focal research questions and were designed to obtain detailed accounts of youth's experiences across the four steps. The questions began by eliciting a description of a major role the youth held ("What's the biggest or most demanding role you've had in the program this year?") and its associated expectations ("What are the responsibilities or demands that come with that role?"). Youth with a role were then asked about their experiences, beginning with questions for Step 1 (e.g., "How did you get this role? Did you choose it, or did someone else give it to you?"), and motivations ("Why did you want this role?"). Questions for Step 2 asked about experiences with role obligations (e.g., "Did the work or demands related to your role turn out to be more than you expected? Explain."). Questions for Step 3 included "What made you stick with your responsibilities" and how were leaders and peers helpful? Questions for Step 4 asked about what youth learned from their role, whether learning transferred to home or other contexts, and how learning and transfer occurred.

Analyses

The analyses examined youth's unfolding role experiences across the four steps. Analyses were question-driven. They progressed from simple to more complex focal research questions to emergent questions about developmental processes. We used procedures of grounded theory and qualitative analysis designed for systematic identification of repeated themes, structure, and process in narrative data (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

We first identified youth who held substantive roles. Our operational definition of "substantive" included roles with individual responsibilities over time that entailed significant initiative, effort, and accountability (e.g., running meetings, writing an article, developing a theatrical character). We excluded youth whose responsibilities involved little decision-making (e.g., painting a wall) or lasted only 1 or 2 days (e.g., stepping in for President). Seventy-three youth had roles that met these criteria.

Procedures for main analyses. The analyses within each step often began with what we called "starter" focal research questions. These were aimed at obtaining confirmation (or disconfirmation) of an expectation suggested by the pilot study or role theory (e.g., Did teens choose their roles? Were demands more than expected?). In nearly all cases, analysis of starter questions, focused on youth's responses to a specific interview item; and responses could readily be coded as yes or no. Findings for youth's aggregated responses to these items (i.e., the percent of youth coded as "yes"), then led into analyses of related open-ended focal research questions. Thus, when we found that a majority of youth reported experiencing

demands that were greater than expected, we used qualitative methods to analyze what the unexpected demands were.

Qualitative analyses for open-ended research questions involved iterative cycles of: (a) identifying all relevant interview passages (typically from a specific item), (b) line-by-line open coding of these passages, (c) identifying conceptual "core ideas" for coding categories and developing operational definitions for each, (d) independent coding of all passages using these categories by at least two team members, (e) resolution of differences in assigned codes based on methods of consensual coding (Charmaz, 2014; Hill et al., 2005), and (f) evaluation of all passages receiving each code for internal consistency and theoretical integrity. This evaluation stage often led us to revise operational definitions and in some cases to revise (or pose emergent) research questions, which then led to a new cycle of coding. For example, we discovered that our initial focal question "Did youth choose roles voluntarily?" was too simplistic. So, we started anew focusing on two new questions (youth's choice in selecting role, wanting the role).

This coding was conducted by a team that included a senior researcher (the PI), graduate students, and an undergraduate assistant. For each focal question, a pair of graduate student coders conducted stages a-e above, meeting periodically with the PI. The entire team then met and conducted the evaluation stage. At this stage, the PI served as auditor (critically reviewing all data for each code; Hill et al., 2005). Following best practices, decision-making occurred through discussions in which all members' ideas were voiced and considered. To ensure fidelity in coding, we followed additional best practices, including continually going back to the full interview transcripts to understand youth's statements in a deeper context, looking across cases to ensure similarity in how a particular type of response was coded, following procedures to insure that minority views in the coding team were understood, incorporating decisions into the operational definitions, and regular memoing about issues and findings in the coding process.

Our coding decisions were driven by two concurrent objectives. First, we created *in vivo* coding categories that were grounded in the words and experiences of youth (Charmaz, 2014). Second, we formed categories and made decisions coding passages based on standard qualitative criteria: constant comparison of similarities and differences, parsimony, fit to the focal question, and meaningfulness in relation to focal questions (Charmaz, 2014; Hill et al., 2005).

We also strived for theoretical coherence among the coding categories. One way we did this was to conduct theoretical analyses within and across each of the four steps to look for inconsistencies and opportunities to increase coherence (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). For example, within Step 2, we found that difficult role demands could fruitfully be divided into instrumental and motivation challenges. This prompted us to examine whether assistance from program leaders and peers (in Step 3) could be divided into instrumental and motivational support; we discovered that it was both possible and increased coherence.

Another way we sought theoretical coherence was to use "sensitizing concepts" from existent theory (e.g., role theory, motivational theory) to inform coding. Following Charmaz (2014) we used these to "guide but not . . . commandeer" formation of several coding categories (p. 30). For example, a number of focal questions across stages involved youth's motivation. We found that the newly introduced construct "internal motivation" was a valuable

umbrella concept to unify youth's varied forms of eudemonic self-determined motivation (including intrinsic motivation, social investment, personally meaningful goals, and internalized collective goals; Wrzesniewski et al., 2014). We chose internal rather than intrinsic motivation because it covers a broader set of motives, like purpose and investment (Schwartz & Wrzesniewski, in press).

Checking for demographic differences. Although examination of individual differences was not a study goal, before writing up findings, we checked if there were major differences in role experiences by a youth's age, gender, ethnicity, and years in program. To evaluate this, we created categorical variables for 11 higher order coding categories across the four steps. These were person-level variables based on analysis of the starter research questions (all but one had yes–no coding) for each main section and many subsections of the Findings. Among the 44 χ^2 tests computed, only one yielded a significant difference at the .05 level (more girls report demands bigger than expected, $p = .050$). Because this rate of significance was not above chance, we only report findings for the sample as a whole.

Theoretical integration. Because our objective was to develop grounded theory, the final stage of theoretical analyses was aimed at integrating findings across the steps. These integrative analyses identified three key development processes, which we report in the Discussion section. It is important to keep in mind that the qualitative analytic methods we used are those of theory generation, not theory testing.

Findings

A summary of core findings for each step is presented in Table 1. The text of this section presents the conceptual story that connects the findings (Sandelowski, 1998). This includes the focal and emerging questions that drove analyses for each step, brief descriptions of resulting coding categories, and quotes illustrating the varied ways youth experienced each category in context. Although we report findings on four distinct steps, these did not

always occur in a fixed sequence. Encountering and fulfilling role demands (Steps 2 and 3) often overlapped. Youth's accounts of learning processes (Step 4) often entailed processes in prior steps.

Step 1. Taking on a Role

Description of youth's roles. A majority of the 73 youth with roles described having a "formal" role—like Dance Captain, Station Leader, Blogger, Mentor, and Secretary—that had a title and predefined responsibilities. For example, Farid at Emerson High School Drama Club served as Stage Crew Manager for a musical, and he described his responsibilities as: "You have to make sure everybody's ready, everything's on time, know what things need to be out on stage at what points, and keep people quiet backstage." A smaller number of youth described roles that were informal, shaped ad hoc to meet the requirements of a group activity or project; for example, being in charge of painting "the natural girl" in a mural, or serving as the "go to senior" counseling new members in the drama club. One program, Rising Leaders, did not have formal roles. Instead, for each event they planned, youth volunteered to join a working group. Then, the group divided up informal roles according to what needed to be done.

Across programs, the responsibilities of youth's roles were often functionally interrelated. For youth working on shared projects, like cultivating a garden or creating a magazine, their roles were often complimentary (e.g., as Reporters and Editors). Most youth's (89%) descriptions of role obligations included expected actions toward other people (peers, community members, and children); their included obligations helping, directing, supervising, teaching, cooperating, and communicating (Kenzler, 2014).

Consistent with role theory, all roles contained both obligations and opportunities for agency. Youth described open-ended role responsibilities: Fulfilling them required figuring things out, making decisions, communicating with others, and taking action.

Were roles obtained voluntarily? Youth's accounts of how they got their roles did not fit into a simple binary between voluntary and involuntary. Preliminary analysis led us to reformu-

Table 1

Summary of Core Findings for Youth's Experiences at Each Step

Step 1. Taking on a role

- Youth's roles had *open-ended obligations*, most included obligations to others.
- Youth obtained roles with *different degrees of volition*: by choosing it, leaders' offering it, or leaders' assigning it with no youth choice.
- Youth had *meaningful reasons for wanting the role*, including for intrinsic rewards, developmental and altruistic goals.

Step 2. Experiencing role demands

- Most youth discovered that the role demands were *more than expected*.
- They encountered difficult *instrumental challenges*, for example, noncompliance, competing requirements.
- Many experienced *motivational challenges*, including psychological strain and self-doubt.

Step 3. Fulfilling role obligations

Youth described three types of resources that helped overcome challenges and fulfill roles:

- Most were motivated by *personal investment* in role-related goals.
- Leaders provided *assistance in addressing instrumental challenges*.
- Peers were reported as sources of motivational support, including through *collective investment* in goals and the experience of *felt obligation*.

Step 4. Processes of learning and developmental change

- Nearly all youth reported *learning new patterns of thought and behavior* from their roles.
- Many described *learning that transferred beyond the program* to home or school.
- Youth reported learning competencies for *taking action* (strategic thinking, self-efficacy, and perseverance) and *taking responsibility* (proactively considering, acting on others' needs).
- Competencies for action were learned through *cycles of encountering challenges and addressing them*.
- Competencies for responsibility developed through *responding to felt obligations to needs of others* (peers, people they were serving) and meeting them successfully.

late our initial research question into two: How much choice did youth (vs. others) exercise in youth obtaining their role? Did they have reasons for wanting it—was it meaningful?

Choice in obtaining the role. Our analyses identified three types of youth-leader transactions representing different degrees of youth versus leader volition.

Youth chose the role. About a third of youth described actively choosing their role. They volunteered, applied for, or worked to obtain a preexisting formal role. At Emerson Drama youth auditioned for parts in plays; and some (but not all) got the part they sought. At Nutrition Rocks most youth were assigned roles by leaders, but Evelyn wanted to be a Group Leader; so she asked for and was given that role. Some youth exercised choice by creating roles for themselves. They identified a set of responsibilities they could take on and obtained recognition from others as the holder of that role. Ethan at Rising Leaders reported:

I always bring my camera everywhere. So I brought it, and was like, “Do you want me to get pictures of this?” And he [the leader] is like, “Yeah!” And then after a meeting I said, “I know we’re unofficial but do you want me to be the historian?” And [the leader] goes, “Yeah, that’s a great idea.”

Ethan created the role, and the leader validated it.

Youth were offered the role and accepted it voluntarily. Another third obtained their role through transactions in which leaders offered it to them and gave them choice over accepting it. Isabella recounted how the leader at Unity House recruited her to be Interpreter: “He knows I’m bilingual, so he asked if I wanted that job and I said yes.” In a few cases peers were involved. Liliana’s peers at Unified Youth wanted her to be President; but the leader okayed this with her before the meeting to elect officers.

Youth were assigned the role and complied. The other third reported not having choice over the role. Leaders assigned it to them and they felt they had to accept. Alan at The Station explained, “What he says goes, I just do anything they ask.” Some youth pointed to program needs as reason for complying. The leader at La Prensa asked Lucy to take the on-camera role of Host for a documentary. Lucy said: “I didn’t volunteer, but we didn’t have enough people. So I was like: ‘Fine.’”

Reasons youth wanted roles. Regardless of whether they chose the role, nearly all youth (90%) reported having personally meaningful reasons for wanting it. They had internally valued goals they would achieve. Many named several. These goals fit into three categories.

Intrinsic rewards. Many wanted the role for intrinsic rewards they anticipated from the experience: “I’m a kids type of person,” “I love my camera,” and “the creative part enticed me.” Enrique at High Definition did not have choice over his role as a Writer for a publication, nonetheless he said: “I thought it would be fun.”

Developmental goals. Another set of reasons for wanting the role was to gain experiences, skills, or credentials. As one youth said, “I wanted some future-building.” They anticipated gaining desired competencies in leadership, teamwork, and communication, among others. Brice who was assigned the role of editing a film, said his goals were: “to look more professional, to get more of an idea of filming, to help me mentally.”

Altruistic goals. Many youth mentioned helping others as a reason for wanting the role. They sought to be helpful to children they worked with, people in the community, and a few mentioned

helping peers in the program. Altruistic goals can be powerful for teens (Damon, 2009). Although Bria was assigned her role as Crew Leader at Urban Farmers, she wanted it because: “This is something that is making a difference. I actually teach someone something. That makes me feel good.”

Conclusion. Only eight youth did not report personally meaningful goals. All of these had been assigned the role and said they took it because they were required to or wanted to be with friends (but four of these youth later became internally motivated). In summary, although youth varied in how much choice they exercised in getting the role, the great majority foresaw the role as serving internally valued goals. They began the role with preliminary investments.

Step 2. Experiencing Role Demands: Emergent Challenges

As youth got into their roles, difficult challenges emerged. Youth discovered that their roles presented unanticipated demands. When asked if the role demands were more than they expected, most said yes (84%). Their role responsibilities required grappling with challenges outside their prior experience and acting in ways that were new and sometimes dissonant. Our analysis identified significant instrumental and motivational challenges.

Instrumental challenges. Fulfilling the functions of their roles, youth reported, required addressing problems entailing new levels of complexity. Many involved difficulties working with people; some involved technical or logistic issues.

Many youth discovered that *the people they were working with did not behave as expected*. Children, community adults, or peers were less pliant and more complex than they had assumed. Amir, a Group Leader at the Nutrition Rocks summer camp, reported: “I thought you tell one kid what to do and they will all follow that direction. But you have to tell each and every one of them.” Riley at Rising Leaders had volunteered to mentor a group of 9th graders during their first year of high school. However, building rapport with mentees was challenging: “At first they saw me as ‘this older kid trying to tell me what to do.’” In addition: “You have those ones that are hard to crack open. There is a good person inside, you just gotta get that good person out.”

Youth also discovered their roles *required grappling with complex multidimensional situations*. Fernando, a cameraperson at La Prensa, described having to balance competing technical considerations:

You have to check if the lighting’s good, no shadows. You have to make sure it’s focused on them and the mic is good. Make sure the person’s coming forward, because if she or he’s back, the shadows will show and it will not look good.

Often situations involved dealing with needs of multiple people. Mila, a Reporter, was conducting interviews with community members (filmed by Fernando). Her role she learned required representing viewpoints of people on opposing sides of contentious issues: “to not be biased, to see their different views—to report them and my opinion too.” Nadir’s role at Emerson Drama was to have costumes ready for 50 actors in a play. Actors had different needs and could be cantankerous when costumes were not ready or suddenly ripped. Sometimes his role required, “just

finding a way to settle a situation without hurting—derailing the entire program.”

Some youth's roles *required them to be tough and assert authority*, a new experience. This often created dissonance between their role obligation and a desire to be “friends” with people. Liliana experienced this as President of Unified Youth. At meetings members often got off topic in discussions she found “awesome.” However, this conflicted with her responsibility to keep them on task planning events for families in the community: “So that’s one of the hardest things. . . . I don’t want to be mean, but when it is time to get down to business, I have to be.” Similarly, Trevor was a Dance Captain for the Emerson spring musical, and when actors were not making progress, his role required assertiveness:

It demanded me to ask people, “Can you actually do this and, if you can’t, tell me.” It kind of asked me to be assertive and often tell them: “You just can’t do that.” Flat out just be blunt with them . . . show some anger.

Youth also reported *role conflict with their outside lives*. They had to navigate conflicting time demands between program roles and their roles as students with homework, members of school activities, and obligations to their families. Youth’s roles, then, appeared to present the types of difficult real-world demands found in adult roles, such as conflicting expectations and requirements to be strong-willed.

Motivational challenges. As youth encountered instrumental challenges, many also experienced motivational challenges. A majority (75%) reported psychological strain or wavering commitment.

Psychological strain and self-doubt. Just as demanding roles can create inner strain for adults (Newman & Newman, 2016), youth reported times when their role demands “drive me nuts” or made them worried, overwhelmed, pressured, or “on my last nerve.” Liliana said her role as President was often “nerve-racking, because now you’re the one that’s talking and leading the group.” Tirell who worked hard for weeks to complete a mural described being so tired that: “My brain, I couldn’t do nothing.”

Along with strain, many reported self-doubt. They worried they could not meet role demands: “I’m not gonna do this right;” “I felt like I couldn’t run a successful rehearsal.” They doubted they had the needed skills or fortitude. Trevor the Dance Captain described feeling so stressed by having to be assertive while trying to help dancers learn that: “I was beating myself up. I say in my mind, ‘I can’t do this, I’m so frustrated with myself, with people.’”

Wavering commitment. This strain and self-doubt led some to vacillate in their commitment or think about quitting their role. When asked if there were times they thought about not fulfilling the role responsibilities, 38% of youth said yes. Jamie, a Reporter at High Definition, said “I thought I would fly through this with ease,” but the combined demands of the role, schoolwork and applying to college made him think about quitting. Liliana, the President at Unified Youth, said: “There are times where it’s frustrating, you’re tired, or you’ve got a lot going on. That’s when it’s hardest to keep motivated. You feel like, ‘I don’t want to do this.’”

Conclusion. Nearly all youth had wanted their roles and took them seriously but, as happens with adults (Ashforth, 2001), they

had not fully anticipated all the demands. Fulfilling the obligations was harder than they expected. Complex instrumental challenges emerged; they created strain that imperiled some youth’s motivation. We found, however, that nearly all youth persevered with their role and met expectations they had for themselves. The next question is what kept them going through these challenges?

Step 3. Fulfilling Role Obligations: How Youth Overcame Challenges

Dealing with demanding responsibilities is thought to be a key mechanism through which roles facilitate development (Roberts & Davis, 2016). So, it is critical to understand how youth are able to persevere as role difficulties and strain increase. When asked what helped them “stick with” role responsibilities, youth had much to say: they described accessing resources that helped motivate them and overcome challenges. They reported three primary types of resources: personal motivation, instrumental support from leaders, and motivational support from peers.

Personal sources of motivation. Most youth (82%) reported drawing on internal resources, especially internal motivation. First, some described having a *do not quit ethic*. Isabella, who had been overwhelmed and considered quitting her role, said: “At first it was hard for me. But then I was like, ‘No I can do it. I never quit on something.’” Victoria explained: “In my family staying committed to what you say you’re going to do is a big belief I’ve been taught since I was little.”

The second and most frequent internal resource was youth’s investment in personally meaningful goals related to the role. Most youth reported at least one of the same three reasons for sticking with their roles that they had given for accepting them (at Step 1). However, for many, these were now described as more substantial investments and sources of internal motivation. Youth motivated by *intrinsic rewards* reported that these rewards had become stronger as they gained experience in their role. Ryan at Nutrition Rocks said: “You learn all of the kids’ names; they know you now; and it’s just more fun.” Bria at Urban Farmers said her role had become more rewarding because she was taking on bigger assignments: “It’s more intense, I am totally in.” Youth motivated by *developmental goals* now often reported investment in specific education goals (“It can help me get into film school”) and career goals (“I can do this professionally”). Youth motivated by *altruistic goals* described being invested in longer term outcomes. Sofia at The Station was motivated because her work “will help a lot of people make life decisions.” As with adults in work roles (Roberts & Davis, 2016), youth’s growing investment appeared to be a major contributor to sustained engagement in role responsibilities.

Support from leaders: Help with instrumental obstacles. The most frequent and salient assistance from leaders was instrumental, reported by 78% of youth. In situations when they hit obstacles with tasks in their roles, leaders had provided knowledgeable advice on how to address them. This included help with discipline-specific challenges (e.g., conveying emotions as an actor), interpersonal dilemmas (e.g., divergent goals among collaborators), and obtaining process skills (e.g., time management). This assistance almost always drew on leaders’ greater knowledge, but many youth emphasized that leaders provided instrumental assistance in ways that respected their abilities. Ethan at Rising

Leaders explained that the adult leader was helpful because “He talks *to you* not *at you*—as a person instead of a lower being.” Many youth said leaders helped them by “believing in me” or saying: “You can do it.” Leaders’ assistance also was useful (rather than undermining) because it helped youth develop their own ideas and exercise agency as the role holder. Ernesto, a tutor at Voces Unidas, had been struggling to gain his mentees’ trust; and the leaders’ advice helped him break through:

She was like, “Ask them what’s happening in school. Try to find out information so you can help them.” I was like, “Oh! You can ask them this? They’re almost my age. I can talk to them like a friend and find a way to help them.”

Viewing his mentees as friends empowered Ernesto to use familiar conversational skills. By helping youth solve difficult instrumental challenges, leaders also helped reduce the strain and self-doubt these challenges created.

This youth-sensitive assistance resembles “autonomy support,” an approach to parenting that is found to promote youth’s volitional functioning and internal motivation (Soenens et al., 2007). Research with experienced program leaders, like these, shows that many place a high value on supporting youth’s agency. They help youth only when needed and provide “soft touch” assistance (e.g., suggestions, posing questions), in ways that help youth develop “capacities for agency” (Larson, Izenstark, Rodriguez, & Perry, 2016, p. 854).

Support from peers: Multiple motivators. The most frequent and salient assistance from peers was motivational, reported by 67% of youth. Youth had rarely mentioned peers as a reason for taking the role (at Step 1), but as they got to know peers, these become an important source of motivation and motivational support.

Bonding around collective goals. Asked how peers helped them “stick with” roles, many youth first described bonds they formed with peers. They had become “friends”; “We act like family.” These bonds had grown through working together and developing shared investment in their work. Youth at Urban Farmers said their friendship and motivation had developed from working side-by-side in the field, telling jokes and making up games to keep themselves going. Youth rehearsing for a play described increased motivation as they began to see their work on separate roles melding into larger group goals and a common good. Motivation was described as coming from “we.” One youth said, “It’s like a symbiotic relationship, we just motivate each other.” Youth experienced not just individual but collective investment and motivation.

Support dealing with strain. Peers also provided motivational support by helping youth deal with role strain. Sophia at The Station reported: “They always talk to me and let me vent out instead of keeping it all bottled up inside.” Trevor the Dance Captain, who sometimes “beat myself up” trying to help dancers improve, reported: “A lot of days I was frustrated, but it was just such a good group of people; they helped me laugh it off and take the stress away.”

Felt obligation to peers. A third form of peer motivation was growing felt obligation to them. Youth were motivated by seeing that their own role performance impacted people they cared about:

“If you aren’t doing your part, it’s going to affect your friends,” “I didn’t want to let people down,” and “other people were counting on me.” This felt obligation was reinforced by youth’s observation that everyone was doing their part. Preston at High Definition said his peers’ “participating and coming everyday showed that they were all committed; and so if they were committed, I was going to be committed.”

However, was this felt obligation the kind of externally determined social control that can undermine youth’s experience of agency and internal motivation? Some youth described explicit or implicit pressure from peers that sounded controlling. They complied with role demands because peers had reminded or “pushed” them. One reported how a collaborator prodded him to work harder: “She is a stickler. She’s always on my case.” Another was motivated: “because I didn’t want my group to get mad.”

“Good pressure.” Many youth, however, described this felt obligation and peer prodding as helpful because it was congruent with the group’s and their own goals. The pressure they felt was useful because it mobilized them to persevere and address obstacles. Alexandra at La Prensa said of her peers: “They kind of just push you to do better. You feel pressure but its *good pressure*. They’re rooting me on, so I gotta do this [*emphasis added*].” Mila a Reporter described prodding from a collaborator to do interviews on a December morning: “She was like, ‘Let’s go, let’s go, I know it’s going to be cold but it’s just two hours.’ She gave me a positive vibe and that’s why I finished, we both finished.” This “good pressure” from peers led youth to proactively self-regulate their role performance in accordance with other’s needs and goals. Some youth reported a similar experience of good pressure from leaders.

Because youth were personally and socially invested in the work, most did not experience this felt obligation as coercive or controlling. Markus and Kitayama (2003) observed that when activities are performed as part of a group, “obligations to others and the expectations of others can be seen as inducing and scaffolding motivation, rather than as a force or pressure” (p. 11). In role theory, most youth appeared to have internalized their felt obligation to others. Ashforth (2001) posited that once accountability to others is internalized, “it is experienced not as externally imposed but as *freely chosen*” (p. 153). It became internal motivation.

Conclusion. Youth were able to stick with and fulfill their roles despite challenges because they had rich sources of support and internal motivation. Leaders provided instrumental assistance in ways that strengthened youth’s experience of volition and role ownership. Motivations came from a “don’t quit ethic,” growing investment in personal role-related goals, collective group investment, and “good pressure” especially from peers. An important finding was that felt pressure from others did not undermine internal motivation, but rather reinforced it. Positive bonds with peers appeared to serve the dual functions of energizing role behavior and steering it in accord with the goals and needs of others. In examining individual accounts, we found that these multiple motivators and supports had the cumulative effect of creating a high level of sustained engagement. Many youth were motivated, not just to fulfill their roles, but to do high quality work—as one said, to do “our absolute best.”

Step 4. Processes of Learning and Developmental Change

Nearly all youth (86%) reported learning new patterns of thought and behavior from their roles. They described learning to exercise agency in new, more deliberate ways: thinking ahead, making and acting on plans, recognizing situational needs, and addressing them. Two-thirds (67%) reported learning that transferred beyond the program: to home, school, or their future planning. We examined *what* they learned and *how* this learning and transfer occurred.

What youth learned? Youth's accounts of what they learned fit into two general categories. The first included competencies and dispositions for *taking action*, the second for *taking responsibility*. Table 2 provides illustrative examples for each.

Taking action. The first category included new competencies for self-initiated action. Through their roles, youth had become more able and willing to speak up, try new things, and devote themselves to goals. These new action patterns often involved skills for addressing the instrumental and motivational challenges they experienced in their roles. We identified three frequent themes (see Table 2). Youth had learned skills for *strategic thinking*: anticipating events, planning ahead, being prepared if a strategy doesn't work; *self-efficacy*: confidence in new activities, life plans, speaking in groups; and *perseverance*: stronger work ethic, not giving up.

Taking responsibility. The second category, overlapping with the first, included proactive thought and behavior aimed at ad-

ressing the needs of others. Following Wray-Lake, Syvertsen, and Flanagan's (2016) definition of "social responsibility," it involved "concern for the greater good and the welfare of others" (p. 130). Youth described becoming more proactive in thinking about, anticipating, and responding to situational needs of others. These involved needs in the program (e.g., needs of children in camp) and other contexts (e.g., household chores, school group projects). Again, we identified three frequent themes (see Table 1). The first was learning to actively *think about others and their needs*, including listening, caring about their perspectives, and considering how to help them. This corresponds to the active attunement to others recognized as an important component of responsibility (Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009). The second was exercising *responsibility and leadership*. Youth reported learning to recognize that it is "my job" to do something for others and "making sure that" needs were addressed. Lastly, some youth reported that the role helped them learn to *inhibit their own disruptive behaviors*, including arguing, talking back, and "drama" in relationships. This learning to be responsive and responsible to the needs of others' is a component of moral development (Noddings, 2002).

How youth learned? As predicted by role theory, youth learned through actively dealing with role demands and obligations. Processes differed for the two competencies.

Learning to take action. Youth's explanations for learning to take action most often involved processes of *experiential learning* (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). They learned through cycles of encountering challenges and demands in their roles, assessing them,

Table 2
What Youth Learned from Their Roles

Taking action	Taking responsibility
<p>Strategic thinking</p> <p>Jaime, High Definition: I strategize instead of going into things head first.</p> <p>Evelyn, Nutrition Rocks: You always have to have a back-up plan. You have to think ahead.</p> <p>Rosana, High Definition: My grades actually improved. Because before I used to leave everything to the last minute and now I plan ahead.</p> <p>Self-efficacy</p> <p>Adalyn, Emerson Drama: In group projects, if I have something to say, I feel comfortable saying it now: whether or not I'm right or wrong or whether I get shut down or they're like, "Oh it's a great idea!" Having that confidence has come from being successful as a quiet leader.</p> <p>Ernesto, Voces Unidas: You build more confidence. You're able to talk to different people. . . . I can talk to my family better. I can tell them what's happening. Now that I see talking to somebody ain't that bad, I can talk to them.</p> <p>Perseverance</p> <p>Chantelle, La Prensa: It made me like: "I can do anything if I want to. It's not that hard, all you have to do is try. Don't give up."</p> <p>Gabriel, The Station: It has certainly increased my work ethic in school, my ability to stay on top of everything at school.</p> <p>Victoria, On Target: It helped me to stay a lot more committed to things.</p>	<p>Thinking about others and their needs</p> <p>Katie, Rising Leaders: It's helped me learn to work with other people, like listen to them.</p> <p>Imani, Toltecat Muralists: Sometimes I am very forgetful and inconsiderate, but now it's different. I just kind of went home and started paying more attention to my family.</p> <p>Ethan, Rising Leaders: It's helped me look on things differently, to view it more of a leadership role instead of: "Whatever? I don't care."</p> <p>Responsibility and leadership</p> <p>Sofia, Unified Youth: It teaches you more responsibility, and if you promise to do something, you should work to achieve it.</p> <p>Farid, Emerson Drama: I now consider myself a leader, and that's pretty much what I like to do—make sure things are going as planned.</p> <p>Carolina, Nutrition Rocks: It helped with volleyball because being a senior this year, you have to play that senior role and be the leader—to speak out more. Like on court when my team's down, it's our job—me and another senior—to try and get the team spirit back up.</p> <p>Inhibiting own disruptive behavior</p> <p>Aurora, The Station: When I was just a participant, I got into a lot of drama. I didn't like a lot of people. I got in trouble at school. And then, when I started training for peer listening, I started focusing more, and realizing what exactly I was doing, and was it worth it? It wasn't.</p> <p>Liliana, Unified Youth: I've realized that here you just kind of control yourself. So that's helping a lot, controlling my temper. It's also helping at school and helping at home.</p>

Note. Presents abbreviated quotes from youth describing how they learned or were changed.

trying out different strategies, and evaluating how well strategies worked. This learning process often began with the types of real-world instrumental challenges identified in Step 2, such as navigating multidimensional situations and different viewpoints. Riley, who had struggled to build rapport with his ninth grade mentees, reported learning through an active process of “putting myself in their shoes” and asking himself probing questions: “Why are they going through these certain problems? Why are they acting the way they do?” This internal reflective process helped Riley formulate and then test strategies for taking action as a mentor. Liliana, the President who had found it difficult to interrupt her peers’ off-task discussions, described trying out and developing strategies for being assertive that were successful in getting peers back on-task. Similar experiential learning processes stemmed from motivational challenges. Airelyn, who experienced speaking at meetings as “frightening,” learned from practicing taking short speech turns: “Even though I was scared, I found I could do it.”

A significant contributor to this experiential learning process involved youth *observing themselves enacting the role successfully*. As in role theory, reflected images of the self appeared to validate new competencies. Most youth described these images as coming from their *own* observations (e.g., “I see that . . .”; “it made me realize . . .”). Enrique, a writer at High Definition who struggled with self-doubt, reported that: “Once you finish it, you are proud of yourself. You see yourself as sticking to it, being proud of what you are doing.” Some youth said these images came from *other people* who “affirmed that what I do is good.” Because of her painting skills, Imani (who saw herself as a loner), had gradually taken an artistic leadership role in creating a group mural. However, it was not until she received praise from peers and leaders that she experienced self-change: “Before I kind of thought I was less than I was. And then people started telling me what I do. It was like ‘I didn’t know that,’ and it changed how I view myself completely.” Observation of themselves enacting new roles helped youth discover and develop new selves.

Learning to take responsibility. Youth’s explanations for how they learned responsibility also involved challenging role demands, except youth often pointed to their *felt obligations* to others as principle drivers of self-change. These included obligations, not just to peers and leaders (as in Step 3), but to people they were serving in their roles (e.g., community members, children). As with peers, these felt obligations were not experienced as social control but as emergent from youth’s investment in their role and the people they were working with. Evelyn at Nutrition Rocks became highly invested in teaching the children in her group. She described how her felt obligation to them helped her learn to be a responsible, effective teacher:

They make you more mature. They make you grow up. The kids, are watching you. . . . It makes you think: “How can I help the children? . . . What is the outcome after I make this decision or step?”

Evelyn’s learning appeared to be cued by her attentiveness to the children, by her felt obligation to be sensitive to their needs and to which strategies are effective with them. This process of learning through active attentiveness and self-questioning is similar to processes Noddings (2002) described as central to becoming an ethical and caring teacher.

As with learning to take action, youth also reported learning to take responsibility from *observing themselves enacting the role successfully*. One youth said that fulfilling her leadership role “made me feel better about myself, helping out as many people as I can.” Youth said they “liked” the responsible self they enacted in their roles. As in role theory (Ashforth, 2001), it appeared that youth were incorporating this valued new self into their global self-concept. Bria, a Crew Leader at Urban Farmers, reported: “Now I see myself as a role model.” Another youth said that through helping others, “I was becoming more myself.”

These processes are further illuminated by youth’s accounts of how the role influenced them outside the program. Research indicates that transfer of learning from one context to another requires active thought processes in which a person recognizes similarities between contexts (Barnett & Ceci, 2002). Our youth described learning through active processes of *discovering analogies between situational needs they encountered in program roles and in other settings*. They recognized similar imperatives in these other settings; and they responded by applying similar forms of proactive thinking and action. Rosana, who has previously avoided helping out at home, described being changed by discovering similarities between home and the program. She started asking herself: “If I can do stuff outside of my house, why can’t I do it in my house?” This realization led her to “help out whenever I can. . . . Before I didn’t do that because I didn’t see why!” Rosana’s transfer process appeared to involve discovering a moral analogy across the two settings and taking ownership of the moral equivalency. Other youth provided variations on this process of recognizing analogous situations and transferring behavior from their program role. Amir reported that his success in getting children at Nutrition Rocks to stop arguing was a catalyst for learning to stop getting into arguments with his younger brother.

Conclusion. These findings suggest powerful, dynamic ways in which teens learn through role experiences. They use methods of experiential learning to think through challenges, discover and develop new selves. They cultivate new sensitivities to situational needs and learn to act on them. Additional research on these active learning processes would be valuable.

Discussion

Theory and research indicate that demanding roles can help prepare adolescents for the more difficult and consequential roles of adulthood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Newman & Newman, 2016). This grounded theory research suggests how roles in youth programs function as opportunity structures that do this. In role theory, a feature of roles is that at the same time they impose difficult obligations, they potentially can empower the role holder in ways that are internally motivating. We found that roles in these high quality U.S. programs for 14- to 18-year olds achieved both: Youth were responsible for difficult obligations *and* they experienced agency that was personally meaningful and internally motivating. These roles created a synergy between the environment and person—between situational demands and internal needs—and this synergy appeared to drive youth’s development of important adult competencies. In this section, we first review findings for the four steps in our framework, then describe three important processes that we suggest organize youth’s experiences across steps.

Roles as Opportunity Structures: A Pattern of Similar Experiences Across Youth

We studied youth in diverse programs, from theater to urban agriculture, who held varied roles (e.g., Costume Manager, Historian). Across youth, it was apparent that maintaining the synergy between role obligations and internal motivation was complex, dynamic, and sometimes fragile. Difficult obligations sometimes threatened youth's role commitment.

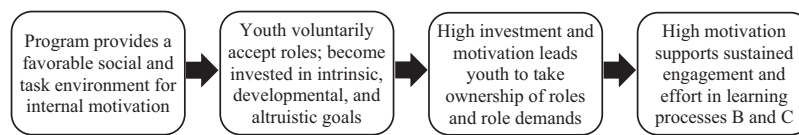
Given this complexity, it is significant that youth reported a notably similar pattern of experiences. First, although a third of youth did not experience choice over accepting their role, nearly all (90%) had reasons for wanting their role (Step 1). A great majority (84%) then encountered role demands that were greater than expected and 75% reported role strain (Step 2). Yet, nearly all persevered, and this perseverance came from youth drawing on internal resources (82%), leaders' instrumental assistance (78%) and peers' motivational support (67%; Step 3). Lastly, through these experiences youth reported learning competencies for action and responsibility (86%), and two thirds reported transferring this learning to other contexts (Step 4). Despite holding diverse roles, youth experienced a common pathway to positive development.

Integration of Findings: Three Powerful Processes

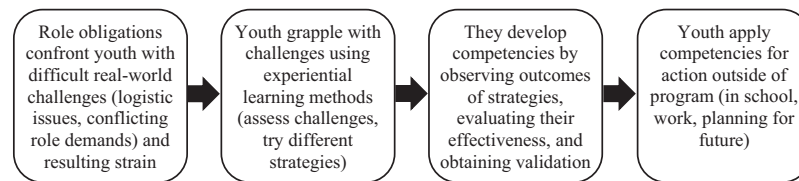
To better understand how these experiences supported development, we conducted a final stage of integrative theoretical analysis across steps (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This analysis identified three interrelated youth-driven processes that, we propose, can be powerful contributors to adolescents' development through roles (see Figure 1).

Process A. Roles can support youth's experience of multiple sources of internal motivation, which foster high levels of engagement in role performance. Our findings suggest that youth's internal motivation in roles was fueled by their: experiencing a motivating program environment, having choice in accepting the role, experiencing meaningful initial goals (Step 1), becoming personally invested in goals, and experiencing collective investment (Step 3). Multiple sources of motivation, like this, create high levels of motivation (Larson & Rusk, 2011; Wrzesniewski et al., 2014), which leads youth to take ownership of their roles and the role demands ("I'm totally in"). High internal, self-determined motivation is found to contribute to robust sustained effort through difficult challenges (Pomerantz & Shim, 2008) and greater cognitive engagement (e.g., focused attention, deeper information processing) that enhances learning (Larson & Rusk, 2011). These were evident in our findings. This robust,

Process A.



Process B.



Process C.

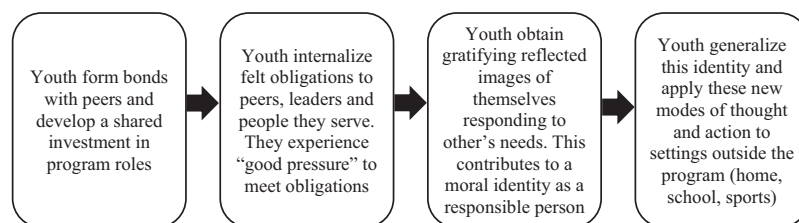


Figure 1. Theorized youth-driven processes that support development in program roles. Process A. Roles can support youth's experience of multiple sources of internal motivation, which foster high levels of engagement in role performance. Process B. Experiences grappling with and addressing role demands build youth's competencies for taking action. Process C. Youth's experiences of role obligations and accountability to others can serve as a potent driver of responsibility development.

deeper internal motivation, we propose, drives youth's engagement in learning in Processes B and C.

Process B. Experiences grappling with and addressing role demands build youth's competencies for taking action. We found that roles confronted youth with difficult challenges. They had to figure out real-world role complications: logistic problems, people not behaving as expected, conflicting role demands, and the strain these challenges can create (Step 2). Because youth were invested, they proactively took on this figuring out using methods of experiential learning (sometime drawing on advice from leaders). They assessed situations, tried out different strategies, and evaluated how strategies worked. These methods, the data suggested, helped youth build competencies for strategic thinking, speaking out, and perseverance. As in role theory (Mead, 1934), youth also obtained validation of these new competencies by observing themselves successfully enacting the role (Step 4). Under favorable conditions roles appear to support a powerful cycle of learning in which youth are invested and devote effort to complicated challenges, then learn new competencies through fulfilling the role.

Process C. Youth's experiences of role obligations and accountability to others can serve as a potent driver of responsibility development. Blue ribbon panels on 21st Century skills identify responsibility as a critical competency for adulthood (National Research Council, 2012). However, development of responsibility is often delayed into the mid-20s (Roberts & Davis, 2016), with costs to both youth and communities (e.g., prolonged dependency, an extended period of risky behavior, and delayed economic contributions to society; Furstenberg, 2010). Our findings suggest a multipart process through which holding roles leads to adolescents' responsibility development. First, youth form bonds to peers and developed a shared investment in program roles. Second they internalize feelings of obligation to the needs of others (e.g., peers, children, and community adults). Some youth described this as "good pressure" and many voluntarily shaped their actions to meet these needs. Research on moral development suggests that the democratic, principled culture found in high quality programs also contributes to youth's responsible actions (Larson, Walker, & McGovern, in press; see also: Wray-Lake et al., 2016). Third, as youth fulfill obligations, they experience positive reflected images of themselves responding to other's needs. This contributes to youth's moral identity as a person who is responsible to others ("I'm becoming more myself"). Fourth, these rewarding experiences often inspire youth to apply these new responsible ways of thinking and acting—being actively attuned, stepping up, "making sure that"—in other contexts: with family, at school and elsewhere.

This evidence that roles can be vehicles for youth-driven processes of moral development might warrant Bronfenbrenner's (1979) comment that roles have magiclike power. Our findings show that substantive roles can create person-context synergies through which youth voluntarily develop responsibility. We do not mean to suggest that adolescents' responsibility emerges de novo in programs. Prosocial behavior toward others is present in young children (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Morris, 2013); and longitudinal research with teens shows that responsibility at home contributes to growth of responsibility in programs (and vice versa; Raffaelli, Simpkins, Tran, & Larson, 2018). An important finding here is that roles facilitated development of advanced forms of moral thought

and action that are possible in adolescence (Morris, Eisenberg, & Houlberg, 2011), for example, responsibility-taking that involves psychological perspective-taking, reflective questioning, and proactive attunement to social imperatives.

Implications for Practice

The role experiences described here cannot be expected to occur with any role in any context. The findings from these high quality programs suggest practices through which staff can create roles and curate role experiences to support youth's learning (also drawn from: Ellis, Volk, Gonzalez, & Embry, 2016; Salusky et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016):

1. Roles should be formulated that *give youth responsibility for difficult real-world demands*. Experiencing multidimensional challenges and obligations is central to youth's learning. Programs can provide a variety of roles at different levels of challenge and responsibility so youth can progress as their competencies grow.
2. Although allowing youth choice in role selection may contribute to motivation, *youth's experience of meaningful goals may be more important*. Staff can help youth to develop goals for roles; also to experience satisfaction from performing roles well.
3. Staff need to *respect youth's agency and decision-making as role holders*. In situations where a youth hits overwhelming obstacles, this goal may be served by providing autonomy-supportive assistance.
4. Positive peer relationships are important to many of the processes discussed here. Staff can facilitate youth's learning by *cultivating a culture of high-functioning, mutually supportive peer relationships*.
5. Other staff practices to support role learning include: building strong youth-staff relationships, modeling responsible role behavior, and providing steady encouragement.

Youth programs have an institutional structure and philosophy that allows them to adapt role experiences in these ways. Other institutions, such as schools, employers, and internship-providers, can learn from these practices.

Limitations and Future Research

We suggest three main directions for new research. First, this grounded theory (the four steps and three processes) needs testing. This includes longitudinal and experimental research examining whether holding a substantive role and having specific role experiences (e.g., choice over role, internal motivation, difficult manageable challenges, and autonomy support from leaders) are related to increased social-emotional competencies, academic achievement, and future role participation (e.g., volunteerism, civic participation, and job performance). It is also important to understand how successful role experiences (and staff practices) vary as a function of program differences and differences in teens' age, ethnicity, gender, and initial competencies.

Second, our findings are limited by being generalizable only to the self-selected population of youth who join programs and who choose or are chosen for roles. Those who join are more likely to be doing well in school, have greater self-efficacy, and possess other social competencies (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009). Experimental random assignment studies are a means to control for self-selection bias within this subpopulation. Complementary research is needed that asks how successful role experiences can be created for youth who do not join programs or seek roles. For example, might shorter, less demanding obligations be created that provide initial apprenticeship experiences in persistence and accountability to others?

A third important direction is studying roles in youth programs outside the United States. Programs for teens take many different forms across nations: service and civic programs, job training, school extracurricular activities, scouts, and life skills training (Alvarado et al., 2017; Alvarez, 1994). Do these provide participants roles? If so what can be learned from them about how these roles are structured to support development for the distinct populations they serve?

Conclusion

In rapidly changing and uncertain global societies, adolescents today can expect to hold many different roles across adulthood (Copeland, 2017; Karraker, 2013). To be prepared, they need *more not fewer* experiences with substantive roles, including roles that provide practice with diverse, difficult, and moral demands. This study provides insights on how roles can be designed that support learning by creating person-environment synergy. Roles in effective U.S. programs are structured to support multiple sources of youth internal motivation. This motivation sustains a high level of engagement with role demands and obligations, which is central to youth's learning processes. They learn action skills from grappling with role demands; and their experience of internalizing role obligations can help them build competencies for responsibility to others. Another valuable contribution of this study is illumination of how roles can mobilize positive peer processes that facilitate social-emotional and moral development.

Increased efforts are being made to promote positive youth development across nations (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008; Smith, Petersen, & Leman, 2017), and roles may be a valuable tool for these efforts. It is crucial that unique characteristics of each context and its youth population be recognized (e.g., cultural norms for youth-adult and peer relationships, poverty, community resources, youth assets; Koller & Verma, 2017). With this caution in mind, we encourage researchers, policymakers, and youth-serving organizations to consider how creating substantive roles for adolescents might facilitate powerful developmental experiences.

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