Leveraging Relational Assets for Adolescent Development: A Qualitative Investigation of Youth–Adult “Connection” in Positive Youth Development

Valerie A. Futch Ehrlich
Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, North Carolina

Nancy L. Deutsch, Courtney V. Fox, Haley E. Johnson, and Shannon M. Varga
University of Virginia

We are interested in understanding the individual and environmental attributes that contribute to a youth’s sense of connection. Specifically, we explore the ways in which close relationships with nonparental adults (such as teachers, coaches, mentors) are a vector of connection through which PYD occurs. We focus on interview transcripts from 37 youth, ranging in age from 11 to 18 years. We look across their narratives of relationships with adults in their lives as well as analyze these narratives in conjunction with individual level characteristics derived from survey data. Several themes across these close relationships were identified as facilitating or impeding connection including: adult personality characteristics, shared interests, and length of time spent together. Role expectations and role boundaries were also defining features in the narratives of YARs. We suggest that context of YARs is an important factor in understanding the nature of the relationship and youth perceptions of adults, in general. Finally, we offer suggestions for conceptual clarity and the importance of using qualitative methods for understanding connection.

Keywords: adolescent development, closeness, connection, youth–adult relationships

When adults think back on our adolescence, many of us can identify a nonparental adult—either a teacher, coach, mentor, older family member, or family friend—who was important during that key developmental period. It has been well documented in the developmental psychology literature that teens needs connections to important adults to thrive. Although we know that the presence or absence of positive and influential adults can influence a variety of youth outcomes, we know far less about the actual processes present in these relationships and how youth themselves, at the time of their adolescent development, are making sense of these relationships. This study adds to this gap in the literature by using a developmental systems approach to understanding the importance of these relationships in real time and to more purposefully explore the concept of “connection” in these relationships. A developmental systems approach to youth development seeks to understand the ways in which individual level “assets” (such as sense of self-efficacy, self-esteem, resilience) and environmental “assets” (such as presence of caring adults, sense of neighborhood safety, supportive peer networks) combine to contribute to effective youth development (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015). More specifically, in this paper, we ex-
explore “connection,” one such environmental asset derived from a positive youth development (PYD) perspective (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 2012; Bowers et al., 2014; Eccles, Early, Fraser, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997; Theokas et al., 2005). According to the “5 Cs” model of PYD, connection is defined as “positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in bidirectional exchanges between the individual and peers, family, school, and community in which both parties contribute to the relationship” (Bowers et al., 2010, p. 721). Our interest is in understanding the individual and environmental attributes that contribute to a youth’s sense of connection. Specifically, we explore the ways in which close relationships with nonparental adults (such as teachers, coaches, mentors) are one vector of connection through which PYD occurs. Additionally, we focus on how qualitative methods helped us understand this idea of “connection” above and beyond the quantitative patterns we observed.

Developmental Assets Models

The developmental assets approach to youth development shifts the focus away from pathology and deficit toward an understanding of asset, opportunity, and competencies inherent in youth. In addition to being borne from a critique of developmental psychology, the developmental assets approach also emphasizes the interaction between individual and environment, proposing that a clear understanding of youth development can only come from exploring how these two contexts influence one another. One such model, known as the “5 Cs” (Bowers et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2015), defines five sets of characteristics (confidence, social connections, caring/compassion, competence, and character) that promote positive youth development and lead to a sixth “C”: youth’s contributions to their communities. Though explicitly named in this particular model, across all developmental assets models a youth’s sense of connection to and relationships with other people is a common feature and is seen as key to fostering positive youth development (Benson et al., 2012).

Although the idea of connection is influential in a host of developmental outcomes, Barber and Schluterman (2008) contend that this rapid adoption of “connectedness” as a key factor in the field of youth development has resulted in a lack of conceptual clarity that hinders the field’s further understanding of the role and development of connection. They show the many ways across literature that connectedness has been conceptualized: as a property of an overall relationship system; as the degree to which a person likes a particular environment or a specific relationship; and as a feeling or an attitude. To further complicate matters, connectedness can connote a state or sense of being as well as the behaviors that lead to its development (known as “antecedent behaviors” see Barber & Schluterman, 2008). This alone has serious implications for what is being measured when we measure “connection” in PYD. Further still, analogous concepts such as “attachment” and “relatedness” further complicate attempts at conceptual clarity. By exploring what they see as common themes across the literature of connectedness, Barber & Schluterman suggest that connection be refined to “a tie between the child and significant other persons (groups or institutions) that provides a sense of belonging, an absence of aloneness, a perceived bond” (p. 213), though not necessarily as intense as “relatedness” or as complex as “attachment.” They encourage future researchers to consider connection as part of a broader conceptualization of “facilitating conditions of socialization”. Along these lines, we suggest that connection is less of something that someone “has” and more something that people “do.” Although the mentoring literature has largely recognized the significance of bonds between youth and adults, and the process of forming these bonds, in most studies we, as a field, still measure and conceptualize connection as a quantifiable asset, rather than a developmental process. Our data suggest that this obscures important aspects of connection that may be limiting its utility for PYD.

Relationships With Significant Adults

In this study we are specifically interested in connection as it occurs in the context of youth–adult relationships (YARs). The presence of important nonparental adults has been linked to many positive outcomes for a variety of youth (Ahrens et al., 2011; Bowers et al., 2014; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). For example, supportive relationships with parents and teachers are related to student’s school en-
gagement (Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005; Murray, 2009; Sánchez, Esparza, & Colón, 2008). Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder (2004) found that close relationships between teachers and students were related to both higher academic outcomes and less disciplinary problems. In terms of broader social outcomes, supportive relationships with parents and teachers can “promote positive adjustment” for high-risk adolescents (Murray, 2009; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). Other social outcomes associated with YARs include psychological and psychiatric well-being and school persistence leading to future employment (Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005).

The presence of important adults is thus an important environmental asset for PYD. However, studies within the field have recognized that an additional part of the equation is that youth must perceive these relationships to be important or significant (Rhodes, 2004; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). This serves as a reminder that the perspective and agency of youth is central to researchers’ conceptualization of what makes YARs significant and beneficial. Rhodes (2004) posits that such significance or importance is defined by the presence of mutuality, empathy and trust within the mentor-mentee relationship. Yet, outside of the field of mentoring studies, we have little information on what it means to youth to have a “close,” “significant,” or “important” adult in their lives to whom they feel “connected.” Though we are gaining a better picture of the outcomes associated with YARs, we want to take a step back and look more specifically at how these quality relationships form through connection. Building on the idea that connection encompasses both an affective state and antecedent behaviors, we explore how, from the youth’s perspective, they feel connected to important adults, and what specific behaviors they report either themselves or adults doing that fostered the connection. We approach connection as both an asset that youth have and a process in which they engage, a view that ultimately demands different and varied measurement tools.

Closeness

Our interest in connection stems from the mentoring field and arises in part due to the frequent interchangeable use of the terms “close,” “significant,” and “important” when referring to formal and informal mentors. Thus, we draw on the work on “closeness” by Berscheid and colleagues (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989a, 1989b) as part of our theoretical framing. In their work conceptualizing and developing a validated measure for closeness in interpersonal relationships, they focused on measuring the degree to which self-reported “close” relationships had frequent influence, a strong degree of impact, and diverse ways of interaction by each person (Kelley et al., 1983 as cited in Berscheid et al., 1989b). Collectively, these subscales measure the level of interdependence between two individuals in a close relationship, whether it be romantic, friendship, familial, or otherwise. While we quantitatively measure aspects of YARs such as frequency and strength of relationship, and we assume that significant YARs carry some amount of closeness, we are uncertain about the degree of interdependence required for YARs to be significant, from the youth’s perspective. We posit that YARs may be somewhat different than typical close personal relationships in that these connections—even significant, powerful, and important ones—may not require closeness as a defining feature. As Arbeit et al. (2016) also note, connections are not limited to the interpersonal and even interpersonal relationships may lack a sense of connection. We therefore use sense of closeness as one way of understanding the defining features of connection.

Attachment

Similarly, we draw on attachment theory to provide additional framing for our inquiry because much of the mentoring, parenting, and relationship literature also depends on attachment theory. Attachment styles, which are often transferrable from one kind of relationship to another (Aikins, Howes, & Hamilton, 2009; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Allen et al., 2003), provide a window into interpersonal relationship orientation. Specifically, characteristics of relationship anxiety (such as fear of getting close to people) and relationship avoidance (such as keeping one’s distance from people) may influence both the likelihood that a youth will seek out or respond to a relationship with an important adult and the nature of any rela-
tionship that is formed. Youth with different attachment styles may also pose more or less challenging to adults who are trying to form relationships with them (see, e.g., work on girls who are referred to mentoring programs for relational difficulties with their mothers; Bogart & Liang, 2013), influencing the opportunity for connection in their lives. Understanding a youth’s attachment style may further help us understand how youth view important adults in their lives and the ways in which they engage in those relationships. Thus, attachment style may influence both connection as an asset (i.e., how much connection a youth has), and connection as a process (i.e., how connection develops). Likewise, such tendencies in terms of interpersonal relationships relate to the type, quality, and strength of the relationship formed (Berscheid et al., 1989b; DuBois & Neville, 1997) and both operational definitions of connection, discussed above, suggest the presence of a bond or sense attachment as central to connection.

The Present Study

In this paper, we want to better understand the pathways and processes that lead to connection in YARs, the varied perspectives that youth have about these relationships, and identify areas for programs and interventions to improve their ability to foster connection. We use the following set of research questions:

1. How can youths’ narratives expand our understanding of the sense of connection youth experience in YARs?
2. What are the relational (i.e., environmental) attributes that contribute to connection?
3. How do connections operate as a process through which development occurs (vs. only as an asset that is present)?

Method

Sample

This paper presents findings from the first wave of a longitudinal, mixed methods study of youth-adult relationships. In Phase 1 of the study, we recruited youth who varied in age from 11 to 18 years old ($n = 289; M_{age} = 14$ years) from schools, after-school programs, and community based programs located within approximately 25 miles of a southeast research university (semiurban location surrounded by rural communities). Youth completed a screening survey and indicated whether they had a “significant adult” (defined below) in their lives (yes = 81%). In Phase 2 of the study, we purposefully selected a subsample ($n = 40$) to follow for 3.5 years to further explore their relationships with nonparental adults. Youth were selected based on their reported number of important adults, their relationship profiles based on the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) scale (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007; see below for details), and demographic characteristics in order to achieve a diverse sample ($n = 40$; ages 11–18, $M_{age} = 13.9$; 57% Female; 78% White, 14% African American, 5% Hispanic, 3% Other). Fifteen percent ($n = 6$) were eligible for free or reduced-lunch at school. Basic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms, which youth selected for themselves during their interviews.

Measures

This paper draws on the Time 1 (T1) interview data with the subsample of 40 youth and supporting analysis of the screening and T1 survey data. Measures and methods used in our analysis are described in detail below.

Screening survey. The screening survey included basic demographic information, presence of and closeness to “significant adults” (see definition below), and several scales measuring youth’s relational styles and social support networks. Here we used data from the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Wei et al., 2007) and the Hare Area-Specific Self-Esteem Scale (Shoemaker, 1980). The ECR was used in the screening survey because it is a relatively short scale that accesses information about youth’s attachment styles and overall orientation to interpersonal relationships. The scale was designed primarily for intimate partners, but has been validated for use with adolescents. We modified it to be more globally about people in general, rather than a dating partner. The ECR has two subscales: anxious and avoidant. Each subscale includes items meant to capture an individual’s orientation to and perception of interpersonal relation-
ships. Anxiety items included questions such as “I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by people.” Avoidance items included questions such as “I want to get close to people in my life, but I keep pulling back.” All items were ranked on a 7-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Reliability analysis for our study population yielded moderate reliability for the anxiety (.687) and avoidance (.659), thus we are only using the scales descriptively for this study. The Hare Area-Specific self-esteem scale included questions such as “other people think I am a lot of fun to be with” and “I often feel worthless at school” and items are ranked on a 1-to-4 Likert scale with strongly agree and strongly disagree as the anchors. The alpha for our sample equaled .783. Participants were also asked to list important adults in their lives and how close they felt to them on a scale of 1 to 5. They could list up to five and we calculated a mean closeness score for each participant based on these responses (see Table 1).

**T1 survey.** Youth took the T1 survey before their first interview. The survey included a number of psychosocial scales, including the Positive Youth Development Short Form (Geldhof et al., 2014). For this paper, we focused on the Connectedness subscale of the PYD-SF

### Table 1

**Participant Characteristics (Sorted by Connection Score and Mean Closeness Rating)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Connection</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
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<th>#VIP</th>
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*Note.* The bold text represents the high and low connected students who were focused on for a portion of the analysis.
scale. Connection items include questions such as “I have lots of good conversations with my parents” and “Adults in my town or city listen to what I have to say.” We focus on the connection subscale and for our population that scale yielded a reliability coefficient of .867.

**T1 interviews.** At T1 we wanted to understand whether youth had important nonparental adults in their lives, what those relationships were like, and how those adults were positioned in their social networks more broadly. We provided a broad definition (Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011; also used in the surveys referenced above), “Significant adults are persons you count on and that are there for you, believe in and care deeply about you, inspire you to do your best, and influence what you do and the choices you make,” and asked, “based on this description, do you have any significant adults in your life right now (other than your parents or guardians)?” If they nominated someone, we asked for more information about this person, who we term the VIP, and their relationship, such as what they usually talk about, if/how the person helps them, how they know the person respects them, if there was ever a time that they weren’t close (and how that was resolved), as well as how the relationship compares to other adults in their lives. We also asked similar questions about an “other adult” that they saw frequently but did not feel close to. Youth completed a Strength of Relationship scale (SOR; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005) for both their VIP and the “other adult.” Items on the SOR include questions such as “[VIP or other adult] helps me take my mind off of things by doing something with me” and “my relationship with [VIP or other adult] is very important for me.” During the interview, participants also completed a visual social network map and several other structured questions regarding these networks. In this task, youth were presented with a circle that was divided into “slices” that represented different contexts of their lives (school, community, family, neighborhood, other). The circle was made up of concentric rings, numbered 1 to 5, which represented degrees of closeness (1 being not very close, and 5 being closest). Youth used sticky-tabs and wrote the name of a person on the tab and then ranked them on closeness. Youth selected the location for their interviews. Some interviews were conducted at youth’s homes while others were conducted in private offices at a local university or in public locations, such as a restaurant. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were fully transcribed and double-checked for accuracy.

**Analytic Process**

We worked as a collaborative research team (two principal investigator faculty members, two research technicians, and three graduate students) to develop an analytic approach that builds on best practices from several qualitative analysis approaches (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Charmaz, 2007; Mason, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To develop our codes and gain familiarity with our data, we first began by reading transcripts line-by-line and bringing our preliminary observations to group meetings. We noted themes that we began to observe across transcripts as well as excerpts that related directly to theories that had guided our protocol development (e.g., types of social support). With our long-term coding plan in mind, we recognized that indexing the data based on interview questions would also be useful in that it would enable us to look at the same question both across youth and within youth at different time-points (since we will repeat a portion of the questions). With both these literal and interpretive index codes (Mason, 2002), we moved forward with trial coding wherein we worked to apply the codes to transcripts and, in the process, refine them and improve our reliability. These refined codes served as the basis for our coding manual which included codes based on theory (i.e., social support, mutuality, and respect), codes that emerged from our preliminary readings of the transcripts (i.e., sense of self-worth, identity, closeness), and codes that related directly to the protocol and specific people (i.e., location of VIP, activities with VIP). Developing the codes in this way allowed us to identify and elaborate on categories of relationships, create emergent codes from themes we heard repeatedly in the narratives, relate these codes directly to theory, and utilize codes that would allow us to iteratively compare our repeated readings of these transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The in-depth analysis for this paper lifts specific codes to a focal level to explore closeness and connection (Charmaz, 2007). We first iden-
tified which questions in our protocol generated narratives about connection. These excerpts were coded in response to specific questions about closeness (“What does [adult] do that makes you feel close to him/her?” and “Was there ever a time when you were not close? How was that resolved?”) as well as any other discussion of closeness that occurred during the interview (including mentioning an absence or lack of closeness, which we interpreted as disconnection). For theoretical coding, we included excerpts where mutuality, trust, respect, and empathy were mentioned—as these aspects are implied in many definitions of connection (e.g., Rhodes, 2004, discussed above)—as well as experiences of conflict (Csikszentmihalyi, 1986; Ubinger, Handal, & Massura, 2013). We also drew on emergent codes, such as “story of the relationship”, that often included information about how the relationship developed over time and “comparison of relationships” wherein participants explained how their relationship with their VIP was different from their relationships with other adults. While these codes helped us narrow our focus, the full transcripts were read several times by the authors as our analysis progressed to be sure any additional discussions relevant to connection were not missed. These codes provided 779 excerpts for this analysis (86 for the specific response to closeness question, 257 for other mentions of closeness, 228 for story of the relationship, and 244 for comparison of the relationship; total is more than 779 because of code overlap within excerpts). Moving from a focal to a conceptual level (Charmaz, 2007), the in vivo closeness codes emerged after several rounds of coding and discussions on closeness and connection and included: frequency of contact, sense of instant bond, length of time known, geographical distance, age difference, relationship shift resulting from an event, sharing experiences, sharing interests, mention of social role boundaries, presence or lack of youth initiation, and presence or lack of adult initiation. The first author developed and applied these subcodes; the remaining authors double-checked the subcode application for agreement.

The analysis for this paper involved iterative movement between the original codes, the in vivo codes, and the full transcripts. All coding was completed in Dedoose, a cloud-based platform for qualitative and mixed-methods data analysis. A total of 37 transcripts were used for this analysis. Dedoose allows for the pairing of participant/transcript level qualitative data with quantitative data to facilitate mixed-methods analysis. We tagged transcripts with the corresponding youth’s demographic information and scores on the “connection” subscale of PYD-Short form and the ECR subscales. Connection subscale scores (M = 4.09, SD = .662) were calculated for each participant. Participants were placed in a “High” group if their score was one standard deviation or more above the mean (n = 8), a “Low” group if their score was one standard deviation or more below the mean (n = 5), and all other participants were in the “Middle” group (n = 24). Similarly, the ECR anxiety (M = 3.03, SD = 1.26) and avoidance (M = 2.95, SD = 1.21) subscale scores were entered for each participant and participants were split into the same subgroups of high (n = 7, n = 9), middle (n = 24, n = 22), and low (n = 6, n = 6). Treating the data in this manner served two purposes. First, it allowed for the identification of general trends in the interview data based on these characteristics that are central to our questions. Second, it provided a basis for narrowing our focus on the participants who reported being most or least connected in order to understand the most diverse perspectives on this aspect of relationships. General trends in the data are presented first, followed by an in-depth analysis that draws further on individual differences observed.

**Reflexive Statement**

Our own relationship to this data is important to explicate. We are five women who ethnically identify as white, of varying ages, who bring a social, relational, developmental lens to understanding adolescence. We realize, and know that research supports, that men and women have differing ways that they talk about closeness and relationships. We also realize that our own developmental backgrounds and experiences certainly influence our interpretation. In addition to employing “checks” on one another (by reading each other’s analyses, double-checking each others’ coding) we also sought to balance this out in other ways. We brought both our codebook and preliminary analyses to group meetings that also included men as well as more ethnically diverse researchers. We regularly
brought up our questions and struggles with this broader audience and asked for direct, critical feedback on our interpretation. As a result, we consider our findings more robust.

**Results**

The mixed-methods analysis provided a general overview of the landscape of our data, allowed us to identify trends across participants, and opened up new avenues for inquiry by showing us differences in the presence of codes between different groups of youth. We present results from across the closeness excerpts as a whole to provide a global understanding of how youth are describing closeness and connection. Then, we compare within and between the high and low connected groups to better understand experiences in close relationships for both groups. Finally, we present case summaries of “outliers” to understand the specific role that important adults played (or not) in their lives that might explain the complexity of their data.

**Quantitative Trends in Connectedness and Attachment**

Given the likely relationship between attachment style and connectedness, we wanted to first examine whether an empirical relationship between the two constructs existed in our data. Therefore, we examined youth’s connectedness scores in relationship to their ECR scores by comparing patterns of group membership across the ECR subscales and connectedness scale. All of the higher connected youth had scores in the low or middle categories of relationship anxiety and relationship avoidance on the ECR scale, suggesting that their general orientation to relationships was more relaxed and open. Conversely, all of those in the low connected category had scores in the high or middle groups of those same scales. These trends were used as a lens for further qualitative analysis, discussed below.

**Quantitative Trends in the Qualitative Data**

In general, female participants were more likely than males to talk about closeness in their relationships with adults (of the closeness excerpts, 73.6% were from female participants, adjusted for the different number of transcripts from males vs. females). They were also more likely to talk about experiences of conflict, negativity or disconnection in these relationships (66.5% of the negative excerpts were from female participants). Although this finding is somewhat expected, given the existing literature on gendered differences in relationship speak, it is helpful to know that it applies in the realm of YARs as well. There was not as large a difference between girls and boys in their references to experiences of mutuality, trust, empathy and respect in relationships, with 52.9% of excerpts coming from females and 47.1% of excerpts coming from males. Interestingly, those youth who scored highest on the connection scale were the only ones to mention experiencing an “instant bond” with those they were close to, and those were all female participants (n = 4). As expected, lower connected participants accounted for 57.8% of the negative/disconnect experience excerpts, whereas excerpts about mutuality and respect were relatively equal across high (32.9%), middle (30.0%), and low (37.1%) connected groups. This is congruent with findings from the mentoring literature on how positive features of relationships may be present across all relationships but the negative aspects of relationships can potentially hold more sway in determining quality (Rhodes, 2002).

**Qualitative Analysis of Youth Narratives of YARs**

**Emergent themes of closeness.** We analyzed all (37) transcripts for narratives of closeness and connection in order to help us understand why youth felt close to certain adults (usually their VIPs). Across all transcripts and narratives we heard several recurring themes that included both attributes of adults and relational processes. Our participants provided many examples of the characteristics of adults that promoted connection in their relationships. Youth’s responses often suggested an attraction to certain personality characteristics. They used phrases such as, “she’s just a sweet person overall” (Carrie, speaking about her youth group leader) and, “just the way he’s taught his class and the way he handles everything” (Connor, speaking about his teacher). Such warm characteristics appear to make a strong impression on the youth. For example, when asked...
what her VIP did that made her feel close to her, Skylar responded, “Well, she’s just a good person and she makes you feel well.” It is notable that the themes youth discussed when asked directly about closeness are relatively superficial and individual characteristics of the adult. The strength of the relationship, perceived impact, mutuality, or attachment isn’t the first thing that emerges. Rather, a sense of warmth and approachability seems necessary at first for youth to bond with adults. Although youth talk about these important characteristics of the adults, such characteristics do not guarantee a deep relationship. Rather, adult characteristics can facilitate a quick connection. Such quick connections are important; as Griffith (2016) has found, youth’s initial impressions of adult staff at afterschool programs can set the groundwork for forming a trusting relationship. But in order for a deep connection to develop, we learned that other processes must occur as well.

Shared interests and traits: Facilitator or obstacle? All but one youth defined their close relationship with their VIP in terms of shared interests. Relationships were founded on similarities and grew through conversations and moments spent together. Having similar hobbies and interests is one natural way to start the process of creating a relationship. For Skylar, her connection with her VIP (her math teacher) was strengthened by the discovery that they both played soccer. When asked how they became closer she stated, “knowing that we played soccer, and that was a big key in how we were—how our hobbies had similarities.” She continued, “It’s really nice because we can converse about soccer that we like to play and it’s really nice because she’s the only teacher that does play soccer in my grade.” Thus, this shared interest helped set this teacher apart from others. It also provided an avenue for the bidirectional exchange of conversation that facilitates connection.

More than specific interests, youth also acknowledged the importance of having some parity in terms of personal traits or characteristics with the individual they are close to. Michael, who often felt as though he was a bit of an outcast, found it easier to like his VIP (a teacher) because of the perceived similarities in personality. Michael states, “he was just one of those persons that, people that was kind of like me, and I liked him.” The theme of a shared sense of humor as a personality trait ran throughout Michael’s interview—he even suggested his VIP was a class clown like him. Michael also reported having disconnecting experiences with teachers who did not appreciate or share his sense of humor. These types of personality similarities also extended to passions and general conversations. About his VIP, Connor stated,

well he has an enormous, like, passion for Calculus, which is just extremely—like it just brings you up, it just makes you, like, wow, I wish I had that kind of drive like he had; it makes you go out and try to copy that.

However, describing an adult he did not feel close to, Connor said of his English teacher,

I don’t know. I guess—she’s very nice, but I just feel like we’ve never—I don’t know—we never had like a smooth conversation. I just feel like we’re fairly different people. Even though we spend a lot of time together—like I have her class fairly often—just never like—we’re just not very similar people.

Thus, both shared hobbies and personality traits act as important catalysts for the youth to begin to feel close to an individual. What seems important about this rather obvious finding is that, in settings that aren’t built around a shared interest (such as the classroom, as opposed to a coaching setting where both parties are interested in the sport), the effort to make those shared characteristics known is often something for which the adult is responsible. The shared interests, such as soccer, or the shared sense of humor, allowed for a connection in the classroom that might not build around the content area. It was one way that teachers appeared to provide a low-stakes “opening” of information about them that offered an avenue for connection. Robert and Colt, both high-connected males, equated closeness more with shared personality traits and experiences. However, sometimes this can provide some obstacles. Robert suggested that the process of working through conflict is a part of a close relationship:

Interviewer: Have there ever been times that the two of you were not getting along?

Robert: Yeah. Sometimes. Just—I mean that happens with every relationship, I guess. When we have similar personalities, and so, most of the time we like each other’s ideas and get along, but then, other times—you know you kind of see yourself in that person, and you do not really like what you see about—like because sometimes when there’s people that are similar to me—similar
He contrasted this with his soccer coach, who he did not feel close to, and in part this is because of what he perceived as a lack of shared seriousness about their sport:

[my coach] just is like—he’s a little bit more laid back, and probably doesn’t have the same ideas toward soc-

Robert: I mean it’s good. He usually ends up agreeing

Interviewer: Okay. Have you ever talked to him about

Interviewer: Okay. How have those conversations

Robert: I mean it’s good. He usually ends up agreeing

Robert’s perspective shows us that shared interests can also provide an avenue for discon-

Looking across youth’s discussions of close-

Looking across youth’s discussions of close-

Accounting for context: VIPs as social-

Accounting for context: VIPs as social-
dent-teacher relationship. The first pathway involved extending the relationship beyond the classroom. This could be accomplished in several ways; the simplest being that the teacher also happened to coach the student in a sport—the shared interest in the sport coupled with the extra time for interactions helped students see their teachers in different roles and settings. But these interactions can happen within the classroom and do not necessarily require outside engagement with the youth. The second pathway involved teachers becoming more personable with the student in the classroom in a way that lets students know they cared.

Skye described this when discussing feeling close to one teacher as opposed to others:

Yeah it’s not just like, okay you’re gonna come to class and learn this today. It’s like I want to know how you did this weekend and she wants to get to know you more, like she makes more of a connection with her students, makes more of an effort to know you as person and not just a student.

Michael discusses the difference between teachers who make an effort to be personable and those who do not:

Like you do more than like learn with like—just like learn from them. You like talk to them and socialize a little bit with them. You know, you can have conversations with a teacher. Unlike some teachers, you can’t even just learn from them.

This pathway involves simply connecting to the youth in the usual classroom setting at a deeper level. Importantly, as noted above, this doesn’t have to be personal in nature (such as the teacher serving as a confidant), but could simply be sharing a personality trait like sense of humor. Interestingly, other types of VIPs, such as family friends, were not discussed as frequently in terms of social boundary crossing; this might be because youth view their role as less circumscribed and as including an expectation of closeness that is not present with adults from other settings. Cecilia provided a statement about her mother’s friend, one that was representative of youth who nominated parent’s friends:

Well I guess since I know her better, I’m more comfortable around her and I think in general people I don’t know that well I’m kind of shy around, but I feel like I can kind of do whatever is reasonable around her.

When discussing the beginning or development of these relationships, youth were often more vague and general about the pathway through which they became closer to a family friend. Often, a youth’s parents trusting or closeness to the family friend operated as a vehicle for the youth to trust and feel close to the family friend, though over time they developed their own personal feelings of trust and closeness. In these cases, the extended amount of time the youth had known the family friend facilitated their comfort and feelings of closeness, as compared with teachers whom youth usually knew for relatively short periods of time. This also suggests that friends of the parents and parents of the friends have an opportunity to build on becoming more connected over time that coaches, teachers, and others the youth interact with in a particular setting or particular grade often cannot. Harkening back to Berscheid’s (Berscheid et al., 1989b) work, duration may be an important feature for close-relationships and a pathway to connection, but we see from these youth narratives that it is not a prerequisite.

Looking more closely at high and low “connected” youth. Because we were interested in how well our emergent, qualitative findings were mapping onto PYD conceptualizations of connection, we analyzed the data using youth’s PYD connection subscale scores. By assigning subscale scores as descriptors to the data excerpts, we were able to see how the code application frequency varied between high and low connected groups for each in vivo code as well as isolate excerpts from each group. This allowed us to see patterns of codes that differed between high and low connected youth. One code, “initiation of the relationship” (i.e., whether the youth or the adult initiated interactions), appeared in different frequencies in the high and low connected youth. We returned to the qualitative data to explore this further.

Initiating the interactions. As we were coding, the idea of interaction “initiation” emerged as potentially central to when and how youth felt connected to adults. We took all 779 excerpts previously identified and coded them for initiation whenever the youth mentioned taking action (“I ask for help”, “I text her or call her”) or mentioned the adult taking action (“he asks me how my day was”; “she checks on me in class”; “my mom wrote them an e-mail”). We also included lack of initiation on the part of youth (“I don’t want to ask a question”) or the
Adult (“she doesn’t seem to have time for me”). Together, these yielded a total of 65 excerpts across 27 of the study participants (41 excerpts related to adult actions, 24 related to youth actions). We focused on the 13 highest and lowest connected youth and present a selection of their excerpts in Table 2. We paired the data in this way in order to explore how connection (an internal, individual level asset) may be interacting with initiation (which can be either an individual level asset or an environmental level asset depending on whether it is the youth’s or adult’s behavior). We discuss further below what this juxtaposition of the excerpts helped us learn about a potential relationship between connection and initiation. Recognizing the previously noted relationship between connectedness and attachment style, we took into account elements of anxiety and avoidance in our interpretation when trying to understand the differences between high and low connected youth as they talked about who initiated interactions in the relationship.

Within the highly connected group, youth initiation took more of a matter of fact tone (see quotes from Skye and Time in Table 2). There was also a sense of long-term thinking and planning, whether around the quality of future relationships (see Skye, Table 2) or the strategic value of important adult relationships (Colt, Table 2). In the low connected group, youth initiation resembled actions that had caveats—that is, Clara talked to one teacher, but not about personal things; and in the second instance she undertook this activity with a friend. This reflects the theme discussed above wherein a group setting can actually serve to facilitate rather than impede a relationship, especially for lower connected youth. Indeed, many participants noted that a peer or group could provide a sense of support or safety for engaging with adults. Michael also framed his initiation of interactions in terms of deficits—he was trying to get attention (he also says that he’s the class clown). Both were willing to initiate interactions with adults, but there are elements of caution (see Clara, Table 2) or potential self-fulfilling effects (see Michael, Table 2). This is critical to our understanding and conceptualization of connection because it highlights the antecedent behaviors that may lead to a sense of connection, and the interplay between the two.

Adult initiation for highly connected youth involves many types of social support, as Colt noted (see Table 2), and a sense of true investment in both the youth and his or her peers. For youth in the low connected group we see from Clara’s story that the initiation she reported from her VIP is in contrast to the lack of initiation she feels from her mother. For Michael, the connection he had to his VIP was actually initiated by his mother sending an email to make the connection. We interpreted these findings to suggest that for youth who report being less connected to their family, peers, or school, adults have an important role to play in initiating connection—whether as parents who help connect their children to important adults (Michael) or as adults who insist on addressing issues with their child (Iggy).

Turning to lack of initiation, there were few examples among the highly connected group for either youth or adult lack of initiation, which is telling in and of itself. Two highly connected youth who did talk about lack of initiation, Cecilia and Carrie, were mildly ambivalent in their stories (see Table 2). Cecilia, who talked about lack of initiation with a teacher who is not her VIP, reported that she did not need to ask this teacher for help because she had other adults she could go to if she needed those things. Thus, her lack of initiation in this relationship was actually a result of her high levels of connectedness elsewhere. Carrie, on the other hand, framed the lack of initiation with her grandfather in terms of the differences in their interests, rather than taking it personally. This may reflect his status as a family member and, thus, their close relationship may be more expected and, as discussed earlier, predicated on expectations based on that role rather than on a need for shared interests or initiated interactions. For the low connected youth, we saw that a lack of adult initiation could signal to the youth that they were not a priority for the adult (e.g., see Iggy’s quote in Table 2). When looking at reasons or ways that these youth framed their own lack of initiation of interactions, the picture was more complex. Clara suggested some obligation to manage the emotions of her father and to not want to make him feel badly for their inability to connect, in part because of geography. Michael repeatedly tells stories about his class-clown behavior and odd sense of humor. He framed himself as “the annoying kid in class” and thus he didn’t attempt to get to know many of his teachers. The
### Table 2

**Excerpts of Initiation in High and Low Connected Youth**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connection</th>
<th>Youth initiation</th>
<th>Adult initiation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| High connection  | Interviewer: So what makes her a two?  
Time: Because when I first met her, she was only nine or ten but I really liked her for some reason. I just showed her all these different stories I had written and then we’ve always liked talking to each other and all that.  
Skye: And like my friends’ parents and stuff like that. Like when I meet someone I just make a connection with them and kind of make it—like I don’t like having a friend where you’re not close to their parents. Like I don’t know, it just seems weird that you couldn’t be in a room with them and it would be awkward or something like that. So it’s just kind of like I’m probably gonna be seeing you a lot so we might as well just be friends. Like stuff like that. | Skylar: He was my old science teacher and he was—he I could actually talk to about personal stuff just because he really cared and asked, “Okay is anything going on?” That was really nice. And I feel like—actually I might move him to five just because he’s someone I can really talk to and knowing that he also is a fun person also. I really just like him as an adult.  
Skye: Yeah it’s not just like, okay you’re gonna come to class and learn this today. It’s like I want to know how you did this weekend and she wants to get to know you more, like she makes more of a connection with her students, makes more of an effort to know you as person and not just a student. |
| Low connection   | Interviewer: So what makes him a 3?  
Clara Hooper: I’ve talked to him more than—I mean, I feel close enough to tell him about stuff.  
Interviewer: Like school stuff or personal stuff?  
Clara Hooper: Yeah—probably school stuff.  
Interviewer: Any personal stuff?  
Clara Hooper: Maybe.  
Interviewer: Okay. So what would you guys usually do together or talk about?  
Michael: Kind of just like joke around. So make jokes or do funny, humorous things. I don’t know.  
Interviewer: Did you have any particular jokes, or did it kind of depend on the situation?  
Michael: No, it was kind of just like back and forth in class between like I do something, like just to like get attention, and then he’d—I don’t know—like make, like pick on me in some way in class. So that’s how that kind of worked.  
Interviewer: Yeah. So you’d do something and he’d kind of like pick up on it and kind of banter back and forth with you.  
Michael: Mm-hm. | Nikki: Yeah, that makes sense. Oh, did you—so when you were working on—or getting his help with this service thing, did you ask him for help?  
Michael: I think my mom emailed him because he—like it would be easy to—I could just like meet with him after church, and we’d kind of talk and say like what—I don’t know. Because he’s been at church, a member of that church for quite a while. So like he’d probably know like what’s going on. Yeah, how to help me out.  
Interviewer: Do you think there’s a way or a place or time you might feel comfortable talking with your mom about this and how you feel?  
Iggy: I don’t ever usually feel comfortable about talking to anyone, but the place where she usually gets me to talk to her is in the car, because there’s nowhere that I can really go other than looking out the window. So she usually makes me talk to her in there. |
Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connection</th>
<th>Youth lack of initiation</th>
<th>Adult lack of initiation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High connection</strong></td>
<td>Interviewer: Okay, cool, does she ever help you with your homework? Cecilia: We don’t have a whole lot of homework in her class and I don’t think she’s helped with other homework, so probably not all that much. Interviewer: Okay, not doing your algebra in Spanish or anything. Cecilia: Yeah, no. Interviewer: Does she help you with other things? Cecilia: I guess since I’m not that close with her, I haven’t really asked her for help with other things. We had a knitting circle in her classroom one afternoon, but she was sort of in and out so. Interviewer: Okay. Cecilia: But yeah I’m not that close with her, so I haven’t really approached her that much.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low connection</strong></td>
<td>Interviewer: So what makes—then—an adult important to you—like that you feel like you can share with? Just imagine an imaginary adult—what would make them important? Or that you would feel comfortable with them? Clara Hooper: If I could talk to them about things but it wouldn’t be awkward and like—it’d just be comfortable. Interviewer: Are there any adults in your life that you wish you were closer to or that you wish you could share personal things with? Clara Hooper: Probably my dad. Interviewer: So what keeps you from getting closer to him right now? Clara Hooper: Well, he’s in Indiana. Clara Hooper: Also just that I don’t wanna make him feel bad, I think. Interviewer: So how did you, sort of, get through that with her? Like how did your relationship come back around where you guys were talking again? Iggy: I learned to bury everything so that I didn’t have to show any of the emotions that I felt, and I eventually just started acting happy at home, and they thought that everything had gotten better at school, like [the bully had] started to leave me alone, but she didn’t. I just learned to fix what I could and take whatever I couldn’t and figure it out on my own.</td>
<td>Interviewer: Can you tell me about [your grandfather]? Carrie: He—and, I mean, we joke around a lot, but I was really close to my, to Granddad when I was probably like seven or eight, when I would spend the night every Saturday night. But then I just, I didn’t want to spend the night with him anymore, and I mean, he—yeah. He likes to hunt, and so he watches a ton of hunting shows, and I don’t get into hunting. Well, hunting shows. So I don’t—and he watches TV all the time, so I’m not really there with him a lot. I’m usually downstairs in the basement reading or watching TV. Interviewer: Okay. So you kind of just felt like you were closer when you were younger, but then you started to be interested in maybe different things? Interviewer 1: So does your mom ever do things to let you know that she respects you? Iggy: When I don’t feel like talking about things, she doesn’t make me, I guess. I don’t know. She’s kind of—She kind of has her moments, but there’s not a lot of—I know that she respects me, but there are times when I don’t know if she even knows that I exist, sometimes. Interviewer 2: Because she’s so busy? Iggy: And she’s a stay at home mom now, so it shouldn’t be that difficult to pay attention to me, but it just seems like now she has to do other things instead of working.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
exception, and the one teacher who he is close to, is the one teacher who persists. Perhaps most unsettling, Iggy’s own lack of initiation stemmed from what she interpreted as a disconnection. Rather than experience further conflict with her grandmother, parents, and siblings, she learns to disconnect and “bury,” to “act happy at home,” and to “figure it out on my own.” It could also be interpreted that this behavior helps her salvage the connections she does value, despite her own negative feelings.

This exploration of interaction initiation (or lack thereof) helps us better understand the relational aspects of connection. Moreover, it provides a mixed-methods example of taking seriously the developmental systems approach by using both quantitative and qualitative data to understand individual and environmental features of relationships and the ways they interact. While in the thematic findings we noted that youth were keen observers of roles and role-expectations, these findings help us understand at a deeper level how youth and adult characteristics combine to result in interpersonal interactions, the building blocks of relationships. We see that relational behaviors such as validation and mutuality become important, but we also see that how youth interpret these interactions, and the relational framing they use, is related to the meaning they hold for each youth. In terms of facilitating our understanding of what leads to a “positive bond” (Bowers et al., 2010) or a “sense of belonging” (Barber & Schluterman, 2008) in a connection, these are helpful findings.

Learning from the “disconfirming” cases. Whereas outliers are typically discarded in quantitative analyses, in qualitative analyses, outliers can be examined to help researchers better understand a phenomenon as a whole. Thus, in this section we focus on what the qualitative data reveals about the trends in the quantitative data (albeit based on small sample sizes) and the experiences of our quantitative outliers. We have now looked thematically, at the overall sample of excerpts, and intersectionally, at the differences in narratives between high and low connected youth. We conclude our analysis by zooming in one step further to look briefly at several individual cases. There were several participants who did not follow the overall trends identified in the quantitative data (e.g., youth who were highly connected but also had high scores on anxiety and/or avoidance; see Table 1). This suggests that highly anxious, highly avoidant, or less connected youth can and do form strong relationships with adults. We felt this was an important aspect of our analysis, because the qualitative data can help us understand rather than reify these categories. We used this information to look more closely at some of these cases and their narratives help us move toward a better understanding of how specific characteristics or actions of adults may support youth who, based on personal characteristics, may be less likely to seek out supportive relationships.

“Time”. Time is a high-connected female who also has high relationship anxiety on the ECR scale, a surprising combination. The high ECR anxiety subscale would suggest that she is generally anxious in her relationships. Yet the higher connection score shows that she is able to connect with people despite this anxiety. To explore how the two constructs assessed by these quantitative measures might be working in tandem, we examined her qualitative descriptions of her relationships with specific adults. When describing her VIP (her older cousin), she states:

He just seems like he’s, when you’re talking to him, he’s like all of his attention is on you and he seems very nice like that and he, there’s, I think it’s just that we have a lot of the same views and also when he has strong opinions but it’s such in a way instead of making you think like oh, I should think the same way as him, it makes you want to have your own strong opinions, too, and that’s something I haven’t felt in very many people.

The idea of having a person focus in on you was echoed when Time described another adult she is close to as someone who “she just like fix[ed] all her attention on you and acted like everything you’re saying is really, really important.” For those that she felt highly connected to, there was not the sense of competing with the outside world for attention—she perceived their attention to her as undivided. This undivided attention may signal to her that she does not need to be anxious about the security of the relationship. From her interview we also learned that she has difficulty connecting with adults that she doesn’t have a lot in common with—so she’s not just connecting with all adults she meets (as might be suggested by a higher connection score). Thus, her high connection score was driven by a small number of connections, but with people that she feels are similar to and
are genuinely there for her and able to focus a lot of attention on her. This opens up a question for further research about whether the quantity of relationships that drive high connection scores matters for PYD. It suggests that the scale may miss something by measuring quantity of relationships or obscure the depth that can come from fewer, but more profound, connections between youth and adults.

“Michael”. In comparison with Time, Michael, who was quoted earlier, was a lower connected male with relatively high self-esteem. Within the 5 C’s frame, one would expect connection and self-esteem (i.e., confidence) to be associated. Thus, we looked further at his data to understand the relationship between lower connection and higher self-esteem for Michael to see what it may reveal about the association between these two concepts for youth. During his first interview, he selected as his VIP an adult with whom he hadn’t actually interacted since the previous school year. This was unusual among our sample; most VIPs were people who youth were still interacting with regularly. Michael was a self-identified “class-clown,” which was a very salient identity that he brought up many times throughout the interview. Humor was very important to him and he connected to his VIP through humor, as well. His VIP seemed to be able to connect with this part of Michael’s identity, “And kind of just, I was funny, so I just stood out for being that kind of class clown kid in the class, so that’s how he really started to like me.” However, Michael was constantly referring to this aspect of himself in past tense. When focusing on that time period, he explained,

Well, I was more like—I don’t know—like energetic or more—I don’t know, higher self-esteem back in sixth grade. So I could just like kind of joke around, and wouldn’t get criticized that much.

Michael’s explanation echoed the earlier theme of VIPs as able to cross social boundaries or break (negative) expectations. Without the teacher who connected to his identity as a comedian, he exhibited lower connection than he did previously. Despite his noting he had higher self-esteem the prior year, at this time point he still had relatively high self-esteem both compared to the sample and relative to the scale. It will be interesting to watch Michael’s trajectory as the study progresses, because his narrative suggested a drop in self-esteem, which may be affected by the upcoming transition to high school and a new setting. His story also helped us see how the flexibility of teachers served as a reflection on his sense of self:

Because I mean I don’t talk or get into very many like—I don’t know—like I don’t really talk to that many adults. Like he’s just like that teacher that’s nice and that I like, and how he was kind of tolerant of me back then, and that really stood out. Because yeah, I was either that annoying kid that was in class, that the teacher wouldn’t like, or that funny and annoying kid that—it would just really depend on the person or the teacher. Yeah, what they looked at in a person and saw in their mind, and who’s like a cool person or good person or bad person.

If we break this down, Michael seemed to suggest that the acceptance of his teacher and VIP was akin to being considered a “cool” or “good” person, whereas the lack of acceptance in other teachers’ classrooms equated to a perception of a “bad” person. This is our interpretation, of course, but it speaks to how youth perceive adults based on simple classroom behaviors, and the meaning that becomes attached to those interactions.

Summary

The results presented above are intended to hone in on different levels of analysis. As the thematic analysis of the qualitative data shows, across the sample, connections to adults were fostered by a number of shared features, including personality characteristics, shared interests or characteristics, and time spent together. Yet, these factors worked differently for different youth. Further, whereas both high and low (as measured quantitatively) connected youth reported close relationships with adults, those relationships looked different, especially in terms of how and by whom interactions were initiated. This became evident in our comparisons of narrative excerpts from higher and lower connected youth. Finally, individual cases help us look more closely at aspects of the relationships which may be obscured through the quantitative numbers alone. Though these cases provide only two examples, and therefore we want to be cautious about extrapolating too far from the data, we do think the data point to key behaviors on behalf of adults that can result in connection. This confirms that individual (youth-level) and environmental
(adult-level) assets are able to work together to present more complex typologies than presented by measures of individual assets alone.

**Discussion**

In this analysis, we explored the experiences of youth and their relationships with important adults in order to better understand the contours of “connection”—a central premise in PYD. We aimed to conceptually explore “connection” through multiple mixed-methods in an analytic manner that would provide multiple lenses through which to understand connection. Through these approaches—thematic analysis, mixed-methods analysis, and case analysis—we learned several things. First, there are common themes across all youth in terms of aspects of individual adults and settings that foster connections between youth and adults. Specifically, youth have various conceptualizations of closeness and significance that may be impacting our understanding of connection. Additionally, we learned that the initiative of youth and adults to engage in interaction might be differentially important for youth who vary on some of our quantitative measures. Finally, we learned that even youth with quantitative “at-risk” markers (lower self esteem, higher avoidance and anxiety in relationships, etc.) can develop very strong relationships with important adults. We take from these realizations three key observations: (a) “connection” is worthy (and in need) of further exploration to become more conceptually clear; (b) different contexts set up different expectations for relationships, and this seems central in whether a connection is fostered or not; and (c) mixed-methods allows the complexity of connection to reveal itself.

**The Concept of Connection**

Earlier we noted that current conceptualizations of “connection” had identified both affective states of feeling connected as well as antecedent behaviors that lead to connection. Our findings support this, especially because before reading that literature, we had identified connection loosely as both a “noun” and “verb” in early discussions. Similarly, the items on the PYD connection subscale also breakdown in terms of behaviors (“I have conversations with . . .”) and affective states (“I feel important in my family”). However, despite the scale breaking down along those lines, in our preliminary quantitative analysis we saw that scores on the connection scale weren’t related to the strength of the VIP relationship, nor were they related to overall averages of closeness in youth’s adult networks (though they were related to total number of important adults provided on the screening survey). This suggested to us that there is still more to the picture about the experiences of closeness and connection in YARs that isn’t quite being captured by the “connection” scale items. Learning from our data, we suspect that the feature that is not quite captured may have to do with mutuality and bidirectionality of relationships, as it may represent a process that is able to bridge both the actions and behaviors of connection as well as foster the sense of being connected.

In their work on connection, Judith Jordan and colleagues (Jordan, Kaplan, Stiver, Surrey, & Miller, 1991; Jordan, Walker, & Hartling, 2004), explain the centrality of connection to human experience. They juxtapose a striving for connection against the backdrop of a culture they claim prioritizes independence, mastery, and competition. They argue this has even permeated developmental theory:

> There are few psychological or clinical theories that do not acknowledge in some way the importance of relationships to individual development. Most theories, however, reserve relational emphasis for the earliest years of life, particularly to the mother-infant bond, and view autonomy, separation, and independence as hallmarks of maturity. The individual is separated out from context, studied as a self-contained being; internalization of structure, which renders the individual more independent, is seen as the desired endpoint of development. (Jordan et al., 1991, p. 81)

In this work, we applied the relational lens to adolescence, what we consider another “critical period” for development, as well as explored the individual within context and relationship. We saw various ways that an exchange of interests, information, experience, and initiation helped grow connections between youth and important adults. We heard the beginnings of mutuality and respect, something found across the literature of YARs, but saw that this looked different in the context of YARs than in other types of relationships. Whereas mutuality in a true relational sense may imply a relatively equal exchange of information, needs, and emo-
tions between two persons, the power differential between youth and adults seemed to complicate this. Youth do notice and respond when adults chip away at some of the social boundaries that largely separate them, but this doesn’t have to necessarily involve an equal level of vulnerability on the part of the adults. Indeed, it would not be advisable for a mentor, for example, to be sharing personal problems with a mentee in the manner s/he might with a friend. Youth themselves have been found to make this distinction in other research, noting that adults can be “peer like” while still maintaining a distinct, adult role (Hirsch, 2005). However, the idea of “receptivity and initiative toward the other” is one aspect of Jordan et al.’s (1991, p. 81) definition of mutuality that does seem fitting for the youth we are listening to. Future studies could further explore these narratives of mutuality paired with data related to youth outcomes and thriving. We suggest that in terms of understanding how connection may move from a protective factor (i.e., one that tempers risk) to a promotive factor (i.e., one that simply supports positive development, not depending on a presence of risk), that mutuality may be key. Although connections alone may support youth, we suspect that growth in relationship occurs in the context of mutuality that is developmentally appropriate for adolescents who are navigating their emergence into adulthood within relatively defined social structures. Thus, we recommend that future investigations into connection, or future iterations of the connection scale, more purposefully incorporate the idea of mutuality and bidirectionality of relationships to capture this nuance. Rather than simply breaking items down by context, as currently conceptualized, we suggest thinking about processes that may be similar across contexts as a way of understanding connection more globally.

**Contexts of Connection**

One finding that emerged unexpectedly from our data was the idea of expectations, and the different relational expectations that youth hold across contexts. This was related to social boundaries, and the ways in which youth perceived their relationships with some adults as being context-bound (e.g., teachers and school). Adults crossing these boundaries could yield closer relationships as such crossing could signal that an adult was willing to go beyond a youth’s expectations of them and make an effort to “get to know” the youth more holistically. If youth were in a setting where they expected little of the adults, there was less likely to be disappointment or disconnection. Connection seemed more likely when adults pleasantly surprised youth (teachers who take an interest in their lives outside of the classroom, e.g.), or when the setting suggested that the connection should be strong (nonparental family members, or family friends). We learned that youth are evaluating adults in relation to context and expectations that arise from that context. This suggests a developmental sophistication that may not be present in current theories of youth development. Moreover, it suggests opportunities for identifying simple ways of influencing adult/youth interactions. Where contextual limitations on connection exist, structural changes may support opportunities to let youth and adults interact in informal ways that support connection (Parra, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002). Hirsch (2005) also found that this informal interacting was key for the successful development of mentoring relationships, but we suspect informal interactions may foster connection for all types of YARs, not just mentors.

**Using Mixed Methods to Study Connection**

Finally, this investigation involved iterative moves between a variety of data sources as well as ways of interpreting the data. Although the screening survey provided some initial quantitative data to assist with purposeful subsampling, the youth in our study quickly defied categorization by producing many unexpected narratives. That initial surprise, which occurred partway through our first round of data collection, forced not only a reconsideration of future protocols and questions, but shifted the themes we looked for and were able to see in the narratives we read. The entire analysis was a process of privileging youth voice and perspective while moving back and forth between the data, of understanding visual maps, identifying themes, looking for disconfirming cases, or seeking to better understand the outliers. In this way, it speaks to how a purposeful introduction of qualitative, narrative-based methods can provide opportunity for youth to speak back to theory and push on the edges of our academic conceptualizations with their lived experiences.
As a result, we feel that we created a portrait of youth–adult relationships filled with depth and complexity. What is known in the current literature on YARs was widely supported in our findings, but the nuances of when and how YARs develop were further excavated.

References


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