

# **“Bettering Oneself to Better the Community” Positive Youth Development Across Three Kenyan Contexts**

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## **Abstract**

Positive youth development emerged as a formal idea in the context of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) nations and has only recently “gone global” (e.g., Dimitrova & Wiium, in press; Lehman et al., 2017; Petersen et al., 2016). One of the greatest risks faced by the globalization of PYD is an inappropriate dominance of, and reliance upon, WEIRD perspectives (van de Vijver, 2017), and the present study represents a concrete example of how such dominance can be avoided. The goal of the present study was to investigate the meaning of PYD in Kenya inductively in order to best understand key constructs that indicate thriving among Kenyan youth. More specifically, we examined how character manifests among Kenyan youth as well as which attributes, skills, and attitudes youth need to possess in order to be viewed in a positive manner. We present findings from interviews of adolescents, youth, and adults in three contexts (rural schools, urban schools, and rehabilitation centers/homes for street youth) and discuss implications of these findings for future program development and evaluation work across those contexts. Using thematic analysis, we inductively explored how character manifests among Kenyan youth as well as which attributes, skills, and attitudes youth need to possess in order to be viewed in a positive manner with 22 youth from rural schools and 34 youth from urban schools. We also interviewed 16 youth-serving professionals, including teachers and social workers. The key findings from the study were (a) no analogue to “character” in Swahili language commonly spoken in Kenya, rather, participants described good character as exhibiting positive attributes in line with social norms, such as being obedient, honest, respectful, loving, disciplined, philanthropic, and being a good listener; (b) Bad character often reflected drug/substance use, theft, etc.; and (c) better oneself in order to better the community which involves fostering positive attributes and personal development, building skills to become successful and giving back to the community. We provide a background of PYD in Kenya followed by the context of character and thriving in the country. Implications for positive youth development and research are discussed.

**Key words:** Positive Youth Development; Character; Youth; Kenya

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