

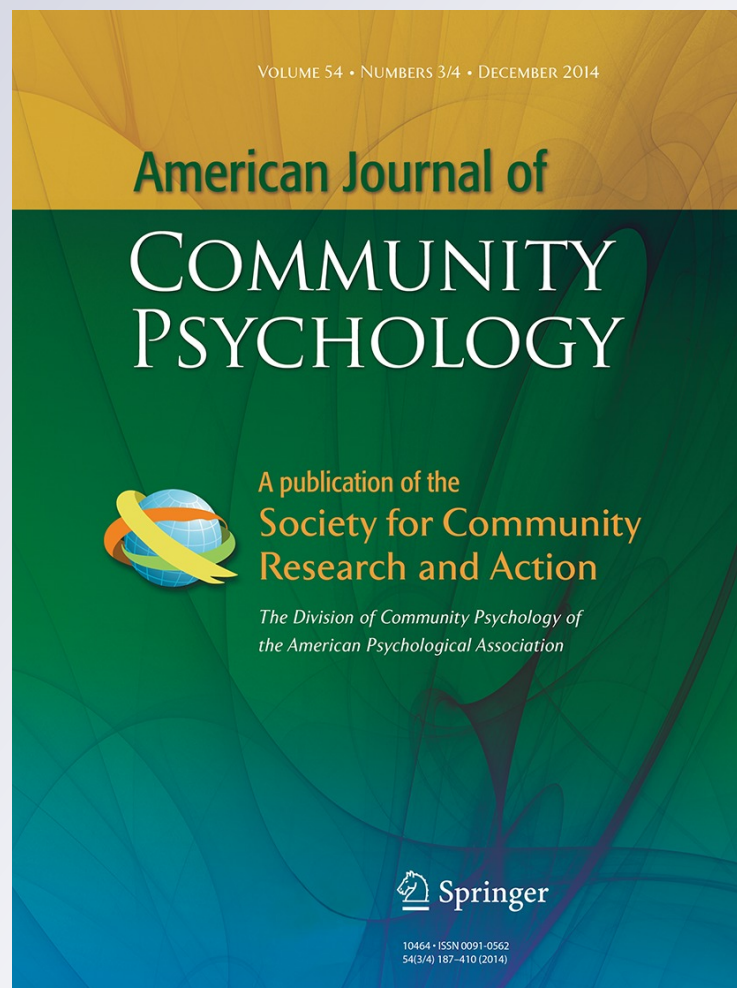
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Conceptualizing and Measuring Youth–Adult Partnership in Community Programs: A Cross National Study

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Abstract Youth participation in program and community decision making is framed by scholars as an issue of social justice, a platform for positive youth development and effective citizenry, and a strategy for nation building. Recent literature reviews have consistently identified youth–adult partnership (Y–AP) as an effective type of youth participation across highly diverse contexts. These same reviews, however, note that indicators of Y–AP have not been conceptualized and validated for measurement purposes. The present study addresses this limitation by developing a brief measure of Y–AP that is explicitly grounded in current theory, research, and community practice. The measure was administered to youth in the United States, Malaysia, and Portugal (N = 610). Validation was assessed through factor analysis and tests of factorial, discriminant, and concurrent validity. Results confirmed the two predicted dimensions of the Y–AP measure: youth voice in decision making and supportive adult relationships. These two dimensions were also found to be distinct from other measures of program quality: safety and engagement. As predicted, they also significantly correlated with measures of agency and empowerment. It is concluded that the measure has the potential to

support community efforts to maximize the quality of youth programs.

Keywords Youth–adult partnership · Youth voice · Youth participation · Measurement validation

Introduction

Youth participation in program and community decision making is an international movement and a phenomenon of scholarly interest (Hart and Schwab 1997; Wong et al. 2010; Zeldin et al. 2003). Its significance is threefold. First, youth participation is viewed as a strategy for social justice. Across developing and industrialized countries, youth are typically not granted admission into the most influential forums of decision making (Schlegel and Barry 1991; White and Wyn 2013). Confronting this status quo, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that all young people have the right to express their views freely, be heard in all matters affecting them, and have their views taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity (Lansdown 2001). Second, youth participation is seen as a strategy for youth development and effective citizenry. Scholars assert that, across cultures, youth voice on behalf of self and others is an important precursor to competence, identity formation and social trust (Arnett 2002; Flanagan et al. 2010; Peterson 2000). Research consistently links youth participation with the development of agency, empowerment, and community connections (Christens and Peterson 2012; Evans 2007; Krauss et al. 2013; Larson and Angus 2011; Mitra 2004; Zeldin 2004; Zimmerman et al. 1999). The third purpose of youth participation is nation building. In many countries, especially those whose societal structures “lag” in terms of

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adapting to changing youth demographics and developmental needs, significant numbers of young people do not receive the supports to successfully transition into the societal roles of worker, parent, and community leader (USAID 2012; Hamilton and Hamilton 2009). Involving young people contributes directly to nation building by fortifying community institutions, building instrumental and relationship-oriented networks, and affording young people opportunities to share their experience and insight to collective action (Call et al. 2002; Ginwright et al. 2006; Linds et al. 2010).

Youth participation addresses these overlapping purposes across an array of community settings. In organizations, for example, youth and adults collaborate on governance boards, advisory groups, and program planning committees (Merdock et al. 2010; O'Donoghue et al. 2002; Kim and Sherman 2006). In schools, young people engage in participatory action research, sit on discipline committees, and advise teachers on student priorities and concerns (Mitra 2008; Framework for Success 2006). In community coalitions and other groups, youth participate in intergenerational teams to deliver training, enact media and communication initiatives, and evaluate policy. Other youth collaborate with adults to organize residents and to lead community action (Lansdown 2001; Flanagan and Christens 2011).

The quality of youth participation lies not only in the type of participation, but more centrally, in the principles, values, and relationships embedded in the practice (Camino 2000; O'Donoghue and Strobel 2007). From the perspective of accomplished practitioners, the most effective type of youth participation is typically labeled as *youth–adult partnership* (Y–AP). Y–AP is characterized by the explicit expectation that youth and adults will collaborate in all aspects of group decision making from visioning, to program planning, to evaluation and continuous improvement. Qualitative research with practitioners further emphasizes that a partnership value is witnessed when key decisions are made through inclusive processes, and when there is mutuality in teaching, learning, and reflection among youth and adults (see Camino 2005; Kirshner 2007; Mitra 2008; National League of Cities 2010; Yates and Youniss 1996).

Recent reviews in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* lend strong support to practitioner experience: the pluralistic context of Y–AP is consistently found to contribute directly to youth development, empowerment, and community building. Wong et al. (2010), for example, identify Y–AP as the most “optimal” of seven types of youth participation in terms of promoting youth empowerment and health. Y–AP has a powerful influence, according to these analysts, because it emphasizes youth voice in forums of collective decision making, thus allowing young people to be active agents in their own development and that of their community. Zeldin et al.

(2013) similarly conclude that Y–AP directly promotes positive youth development, particularly in the socio-emotional domains of confidence, mastery, and connectedness. These analysts also highlight the role of adult partners. They conclude that Y–AP derives its influence when adults have the willingness and ability to share power, while concurrently, preparing youth through scaffolding, mentoring, and direct instruction. Jacquez et al. (2013) reviewed the literature on community and school-based youth participatory action research (see also Langhout and Thomas 2010). They note that there are few studies examining youth participation and youth outcomes. Nonetheless, they suggest that Y–AP is central to high quality youth participation because it effectively challenges dominant societal narratives regarding the ability of youth to participate in important decision-making. They offer examples of Y–AP to underscore the potential of the practice to youth participation.

Study Purpose and Approach

Given the consensus among field professionals and university scholars across a broad array of disciplines, we are curious as to why Y–AP has not yet become a normative practice. Research suggests two salient reasons. The first is that Y–AP is difficult to implement with quality. Many adults do not have the skill or inclination to share decision making authority with youth and rarely are societal norms and institutions designed to support Y–AP (Camino and Zeldin 2002; Strobel et al. 2008). The second challenge is one of conceptualization and measurement. Only recently have scholars begun to systematically categorize different types of youth participation, including Y–AP (Jacquez et al. 2013; Wong et al. 2010). These efforts have helped the field move toward shared conceptualizations of Y–AP. There is now a consistent call for validated measures of Y–AP that reflect contemporary research and practice. Youth perspectives of their roles and relationships with adults are seen as particularly important when constructing these measures (Ferreira et al. 2012; Kirby and Bryson 2002; Langhout and Thomas 2010).

The present study responds to this call. Our purpose was to create a valid measure of Y–AP to spark future research while also being suitable for assessing practice. Our specific aim was to create a “setting neutral” instrument that would be applicable across community programs. We initiated the inquiry by conceptualizing Y–AP for measurement purposes. Expert validity and theoretical generalizability for Y–AP was then established by synthesizing insight from empirical, policy, and practice perspectives (Fine 2007). From these diverse sources, we constructed a measure of Y–AP with two dimensions: youth voice in decision making (YVDM) and supportive adult relationships (SAR). This

measure was then tested with a sample drawn from the United States, Portugal and Malaysia through factor analysis and tests of factorial, discriminant, and concurrent validity.

Methods

Sample and Selection

The present study was conducted in the context of an investigation into the quality of community programs. Recruitment procedures were designed to maximize the heterogeneity of young people across cultures and age. Specifically, three countries—the United States, Malaysia, and Portugal—were selected given their diversity in culture, ethnicity, language, and religion. Within each country, youth participants were recruited through community programs. This sampling strategy, with the aim of heterogeneity, strengthens validation studies by allowing the fit of the predicted models to be tested across different conditions (Knight et al. 2003; Richardsen and Martinussen 2004; Schaufeli et al. 2002). We approached programs that self-identified as emphasizing positive youth development. That is, their menu of services focused on social, recreation, health and academic support rather than activism, community service, or participatory action research. As Ozer and Schotland (2011) argue, the inclusion of youth who have not self-selected into a “youth-directed” or “community change” oriented program offers researchers the opportunity to demonstrate that a newly developed measure is applicable across a broad cross-section of youth settings. In the United States, participants were recruited from two youth development programs operated by a community center in a mid-sized city. Their target population was African-American youth from across a wide catchment area of urban neighborhoods. In Malaysia, participants were drawn from four state registered afterschool programs in a large city. The programs offered a comparable array of youth development services, but tended to be culturally specific. Two of the programs served primarily Malay youth while two focused on Chinese young people. In Portugal, participants were members of a national youth development organization who were attending a regional retreat outside of a large city. Participants were primarily from small to mid-sized cities.

Table 1 highlights demographic variation across and within the three countries. Overall, 647 youth completed the survey, with 37 excluded because of incomplete data. The average age was 17.6 ($SD = 3.21$). Fifty-one percent of the sample was male. The sample was racially and ethnically diverse: 55.2 % identified as Asian, 23.1 % as Latino, 16.3 % as African-American, and 2.8 % as Caucasian. The majority of the sample identified as Christian

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the sample (%)

	United States (n = 141)	Malaysia (n = 328)	Portugal (n = 141)	Cumulative percent (n = 610)
Age				
11–18	94.3	55.5	26.2	57.7
19–24	5.7	44.5	73.8	42.3
Gender				
Female	56.4	45.3	52.5	49.5
Male	43.6	54.7	47.5	50.5
Race/ethnicity				
White	12.2	–	–	2.8
Black/African American	69.5	–	–	16.3
Asian	8.5	–	–	55.2
Malay	–	53.8	–	–
Chinese	–	43.5	–	–
Latino/Hispanic	7.1	–	–	23.1
Portuguese	–	–	91.5	–
Other	2.8	2.7	8.5	3.2
Religious affiliation				
None	41.6	.6	8.4	11.1
Christian	45.6	12.2	90.1	36.9
Buddhist	.8	27.9	0	15.8
Muslim	4.0	54.1	.8	31.4
Other	8.0	5.2	.8	4.8
Mother's education				
Some high school or less	5.3	28.8	51.9	30.4
High school graduate or some college	73.4	57.3	30.2	53.3
College graduate or beyond	21.3	13.9	17.8	16.2

(36.9 %), followed by Muslim (31.4 %) and Buddhist (15.8 %). On average, mothers of the youth participants had completed the equivalent of a high school education or some college.

Measures

Y–AP: Youth Voice in Decision Making and Supportive Adult Relationships

Y–AP is the practice of youth and adults working together for a common purpose in a collective, pluralistic fashion (Wong et al. 2010; Zeldin et al. 2013). For measurement purposes, we began our inquiry by conceptualizing Y–AP as a principal-based “developmental relationship” that

holistically encompasses the attributes of role, activity, and connection (Camino 2000; Li and Jullian 2012). As we synthesized the scholarship on Y–AP as well as other sources on youth-adult relationships (particularly Baumeister and Leary 1995; Larson and Angus 2011; Rappaport 1981; Rogoff 2003), it became evident that two components of Y–AP were central to its influence on positive youth development and empowerment: *YVDM* and *SAR*. In virtually all theoretical and empirical analyses, Y–AP is characterized by youth believing that they have authentic opportunities to influence decision making throughout the life of an initiative, program, or activity. The role of adults is also foregrounded. Y–AP is uniformly characterized by youth believing that they are trusted as both leaders and as learners by the adults with whom they interact.

To further conceptualize and operationalize the constructs of “youth voice” and “supportive adults” we examined the principles embedded in the policies of practice of national youth organizations. This review revealed a consistency in emphasis with the syntheses cited above. For illustration, USAID’s (2012, p. 12) recent youth policy directive directs funds to be allocated toward those programs where “youth have specific roles in assessment, program design, implementation and evaluation.” While USAID focuses on youth voice, 4-H National Headquarters (2012, p. 4) emphasizes the importance of supportive adults who “lead, advise and partner with youth.” The Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth (2002, p. 14) urges its adult members to provide opportunities for youth voice by “opening doors that have been historically closed to young people, challenging them to succeed, and preparing them to interact as equals with adults in a variety of public settings.” The National League of Cities (2010, pp. 31–33) urges its members to “learn the dynamics of youth-adult partnership and group work” to help youth “prepare to navigate adult settings.” Moreover, it challenges adults to “model the kind of youth-adult relationship [you] seek for the community.”

The research team then reviewed existing Y–AP focused program assessment instruments. These tools, because they are designed to address the accountability demands of programs, provide insight into what practitioners believe is most useful to measure. While these instruments have not been validated, they assisted us in generating words and phrases to operationalize the two dimensions of Y–AP. Stanford’s Gardner Center (Westrich 2011), for illustration, examines the extent to which organizations “provide youth with opportunities to collaborate with adults from the community,” “incorporate youth input into their decision making processes,” and “provide training to adults on how to partner with youth.” Most instruments, however, focus more directly on the youth-adult relationship. Penn State Extension (Scheve et al. 2005), for example, asks young

people to assess the degree to which “my opinions and ideas are respected by adults on the team,” and “when I need help, I know that adults are willing to assist me.” The University of Wisconsin youth survey (Camino et al. 2006) is similar. Examples include: “In this group, youth get to make choices and decisions about the things they want to do,” “Youth have a say in setting the agenda or goals for the work of this team,” and “There is a good balance of power between youth and adults in this group.” O’Donoghue and Strobel (2007) examine youth–adult relationships by asking youth participants to respond to items such as “adults and youth plan things together here,” “youth here get to plan all kinds of events and activities,” and “I can talk to the adults here about things that are bothering me.”

Our synthesis of these sources resulted in the drafting of a new measure of Y–AP with two dimensions, *YVDM* and *SAR*. To ensure semantic equivalence across languages, conceptual equivalence across cultures, and normative equivalence across societies, we undertook several steps as outlined by Behling and Law (2000). The initial version of the survey was shared with the respective research team from each country for feedback and modifications regarding cultural relevancy. For example, given the influence of religious institutions on young people’s lives in Malaysia, questions regarding connections to religious organizations were added to the survey. The survey was then translated into Malay and Portuguese. Reverse translation processes were followed by the research teams in each country to ensure consistency and accuracy. The survey was then piloted with young people in each country and final modifications were made. The finalized *YVDM* subscale consisted of five statements assessed by a five point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* (e.g., “Youth and adults learn a lot from working together in this center;” “Youth and staff trust each other in this center.”). The *SAR* subscale consisted of six statements, similarly assessed (e.g., “The staff take my ideas seriously;” “In this center, I am encouraged to express my ideas and opinions”).

There is a lack of consensus among researchers as to whether using a mix of negatively and positively worded items reduces response bias. Traditionally, measurement researchers advocated for the use of negatively worded items to protect against bias and acquiescent behaviors of respondents. Recent research, however, suggests that the increased item complexity resulting from this practice can confuse youth respondents, causing them to misunderstand an item or answer differently than they would to positively worded statements (Barnette 1996, 2000). As a result, researchers in youth-related fields have called for the abandonment of the use of negatively worded items in the design of their measures (Peterson et al. 2011). Following this line of reasoning, we included only positively-worded

items in the Y–AP measure out of concern with how youth from highly disparate cultures would interpret negatively-worded items.

Safe Environment and Program Engagement

Two key aspects of program quality were included in the survey to allow tests of discriminant validity with the newly created Y–AP measure. Safe environment (SEN) ($\alpha = .84$) was self-developed, drawn from the emotional safety rubric from the Youth Program Quality Assessment (Forum for Youth Investment 2012). This measure used four items (e.g., “I feel safe when I’m in this center;” “Bullying and aggression are not tolerated here”) to assess young people’s feelings of emotional and psychological safety during program participation. Program engagement (PE) ($\alpha = .85$) was adapted from Vandell et al.’s (2005) study of engagement in afterschool settings. This measure used four statements (“I enjoy most everything I do in this center;” “I concentrate hard when I’m involved with programs at the community center”) to assess young people’s level of engagement in program activities. For both measures, statements were rated using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

Youth Development Outcomes

Four additional measures were administered to participants. Y–AP, particularly youth voice, is central to the development of youth agency and empowerment across cultures (Arnett 2002; Peterson 2000). Therefore, measures of these constructs were included to examine concurrent validity. Agency ($\alpha = .76$) was measured using 9-items from the Boston University Empowerment Scale (Rogers et al. 1997). Items (e.g., “I generally accomplish what I set out to do;” “I have a positive attitude about myself”) were answered using a five-point Likert-type scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Empowerment ($\alpha = .73$) was assessed using an eight-item scale adaptation of the Sociopolitical Control Scale for Youth (Peterson et al. 2011). Respondents answered items (e.g., “I would rather have a leadership role when I’m involved in a group project;” “My opinion is important because it could someday make a difference in my community or school”) using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Measures of self-esteem and school grades were included for points of comparison to agency and empowerment for testing concurrent validity. Self-esteem ($\alpha = .76$) was measured using Rosenberg’s (1989) 10-item self-esteem scale. Respondents answered items (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself;” “I am able to do things as well as most other people”) using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to

Table 2 Factor loadings, means and standard deviations for youth–adult partnership scale items

Item statement	Factors	
	SAR	YVDM
Youth and staff trust each other in this center	.91	
There is a good balance of power between youth and adults in this center	.79	
Youth and adults learn a lot from working together in this center	.79	
In this center, it is clear that youth and staff respect each other	.78	
Staff learn a lot from youth at this center	.64	
I have a say in planning programs at this center		.84
The staff take my ideas seriously		.77
I am expected to voice my concerns when I have them		.76
In this center, I am encouraged to express my ideas and opinions		.71
<i>M</i>	4.02	3.85
<i>SD</i>	.69	.70

SAR supportive adult relationships, YVDM youth voice in decision making

Strongly Agree. Finally, school grades were assessed on a five-point scale ranging from *Mostly As* to *Mostly Fs*.

Procedures

Each site followed the research and ethical standards required by their respective countries when administering surveys. In the United States and Portugal, per institutional review boards (IRB) requirements, letters of support from each participating program were collected. Parental consent and youth assent forms were then signed and collected prior to young people participating in the study. In Malaysia, the lead institution did not require ethics approval for non-sensitive social science research, but approval to conduct the study was gained from each participating program director. Youth participants within each program were allowed to choose whether to participate. Research team members, following standard protocols, administered the questionnaires. In all settings, young people were encouraged to answer all questions on the survey, but were also reminded that their participation was voluntary and they were not required to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable.

Results

We explore the validity of the new Y–AP measure from multiple perspectives. We first conducted exploratory and

confirmatory factor analysis with the complete sample. Factorial validity was then examined using multi-group analysis to explore model fit among different age groups. Subsequent to establishing an acceptable model fit, discriminant and concurrent validity were examined.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

EFA was conducted using oblique (promax) rotation (Table 2) to explore the inter-relatedness of the factors (De Jong et al. 1976). The rotated factor matrix resulted in two factors, accounting for 64.83 % of the total variance. The factors were labelled SAR (SAR: 52.85 % of total variance) and YVDM (YVDM: 11.98 % of the variance).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Post Hoc Modification

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to test the hypothesized two-factor model. A missing data analysis was completed to examine the relationships between missing values on each variable. No statistically significant relationships were observed. Therefore, a listwise deletion procedure was used (Schreiber 2008). Factor loadings were allowed to vary freely. Factor variances were constrained to one (1). The data were somewhat skewed, but below an absolute value of 2. Therefore, an ML estimation with robust standard errors was performed. The overall model fit for the CFA was assessed using several indices suggested by Schreiber et al. (2009) and Jackson et al. (2009). The Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and the comparative fit index (CFI) are both incremental fit indices that compare the target model to the null model. A CFI and TLI >.90 suggest an acceptable fit and above .95 a good fit (Hu and Bentler 1999). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is an index of absolute fit that examines how well the present model approximates the data; values <.05 suggest a good fit and <.08 suggest an acceptable fit (Schreiber 2008). The overall Chi square (χ^2) is also reported although it is only used to compare the fit of contrasting models. It is the statistical test of the lack of fit based on over identifying restrictions on the target model. This index should not be statistically significant, although this is a function of sample size and will usually be rejected with large samples (Ozer and Schotland 2011). After these four fit indices were examined, our two-factor model showed adequate fit, $\chi^2(43) = 223.04$, $p < .001$; TLI = .934; CFI = .948; RMSEA = .083.

Further inspection of the two-factor model's modification indices, however, revealed high covariance on two items; one for SAR ("I learn a lot from staff at this center") and one for YVDM ("In this center, I get to make decisions about the things I want to do"). The two items were deleted

Table 3 Indices of overall fit comparison across age groups and countries

Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	RMSEA	TLI	CFI
Modified	103.62	26	.07	.959	.970
11–18	82.50	26	.079	.944	.960
19–24	71.57	26	.082	.950	.964
USA	50.93	26	.083	.957	.969
Portugal	52.63	26	.086	.933	.951
Malaysia	87.52	26	.085	.930	.950

to provide a more parsimonious measure. The final two-factor model with these modifications showed improved fit, $\chi^2(26) = 103.615$, $p < .001$; TLI = .959; CFI = .970; RMSEA = .07. The final model included the two hypothesized scales of SAR (five items, $\alpha = .87$), and YVDM (four items, $\alpha = .82$) (see Table 2 for factor loadings). To confirm the two-factor structure of the model, a one-dimensional model gave unsatisfactory fit indexes: $\chi^2(27) = 331.214$, $p < .001$; TLI = .844; CFI = .883; RMSEA = .136. Thus, results of the CFA confirmed the multidimensional nature of the measure.

Factorial Validity

Given the breadth of age of our sample, we explored the extent to which the factor structure holds for youth of different ages and cultures. The sample was broken into two groups (11–18 and 19–24 years), and by three countries. Because AMOS only provides overall fit indices, we first conducted multi-group analysis to compare the fit indices for each age group and country with the overall sample. The results for the individual age groups and countries revealed acceptable, albeit somewhat poorer, fit indices to the data than the total sample (Table 3).

Next, we ran the equivalence test to estimate whether each subsample (i.e., age group and country) had equivalent factor loadings, factor variances and covariances (Byrne 2010; Jöreskog and Sörbom 1997). Results for the age group analysis showed that the model that allowed all parameters to be different in the subsamples was significantly better than the model that required equal factor loadings, variances and covariances, $\Delta\chi^2(12, N = 610) = 73.845$, $p < .001$. However, the fit indices did not change significantly and the RMSEA value was well within the acceptable range in the model with equality constraints (GFI = .926; CFI = .939; TLI = .938; RMSEA = .061). For analysis by country, the findings showed somewhat weaker yet similar results. The model that allowed all parameters to be different in the subsamples was again significantly better than the model that required equal factor loadings, variances and covariances, $\Delta\chi^2(24, N = 610) = 161.135$, $p < .001$. The fit indices

and RMSEA value were within acceptable ranges in the model with equality constraints (GFI = .884; CFI = .902; TLI = .909; RMSEA = .06). Despite the age and cultural diversity of the sample, the results indicate that the proposed two-factor structure of the Y–AP measure could be reasonably replicated in the total sample as well as across different groups of youth and cultures.

Discriminant Validity

We next explored whether the two dimensions of Y–AP were sufficiently distinct from two additional components of program quality: SEN and PE. The examination of discriminant validity can be a key analytic strategy for validity studies using CFA (Farrell 2010). This is especially true, we believe, when constructing setting-neutral measures of program quality. For these reasons, we ran a CFA with the two Y–AP measures along with measures for SEN and PE. The four-factor model showed good fit [$\chi^2(113) = 370.564$, $p < .001$; TLI = .947; CFI = .956; RMSEA = .06]. We then applied the Fornell and Larcker (1981) technique to assess discriminant validity where for any two constructs, the variance extracted estimates (AVE) for both need to be larger than the shared variance (i.e., square of the correlation) between them (Hair et al. 2006). Our results showed that all variance extracted estimates (AVE) were greater than the squared correlation estimates for each pair of measures, with the exception of SEN–PE. In the latter case, the correlation between the measures was still well below .9, ruling out the possibility of multicollinearity (Tabachnik and Fidell 2007), thus demonstrating strong discriminant validity.

Concurrent Validity

Pearson intercorrelations for the two Y–AP subscales and the four external criteria measures were conducted (Table 4). Given that Y–AP has previously been found to be influential in the development of agency and empowerment, we predicted that correlations would be higher than those between Y–AP and self esteem and grades. As seen in Table 2, the two Y–AP subscales positively correlated with each other ($r = .64$). The two Y–AP subscales were positively correlated with agency and empowerment ($r = .37$ – $.44$), suggesting concurrent validity. The Y–AP subscales were also associated with self-esteem and school grades. As expected however, these correlations ($r = .18$ – $.35$) were of a smaller magnitude than those detected with agency and empowerment.

Discussion

Youth have become increasingly segregated from nonfamilial adults in the social and civic spheres of community

Table 4 Correlation matrix of study variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. YVDM	–					
2. SAR	.64**	–				
3. Agency	.40**	.37**	–			
4. Empowerment	.44**	.37**	.51**	–		
5. Self-esteem	.35**	.22**	.46**	.29**	–	
6. School grades	.25**	.18**	.25**	.27**	.25**	–

SAR supportive adult relationships, YVDM youth voice in decision making; Pearson two-tailed correlations

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

life worldwide (Bronfenbrenner 1970; Call et al. 2002; Modell and Goodman 1990; Schlegel and Barry 1991). Community-based youth programs are perhaps the most effective developmental context for intergenerational participation (Strobel et al. 2008). They can provide free spaces where young people can imagine possibilities, debate options, take on responsible social roles, and collaborate with adult residents and community workers. Consequently, young people in many countries are given the opportunity to meet the overlapping purposes of youth participation: ensuring youth rights while promoting positive youth development, identity, empowerment, and nation building (Flanagan et al. 2010; Hamilton and Hamilton 2009; Peterson 2000). In many countries across Europe, such as Portugal and Northern Ireland, youth organizations have sparked a renewal of citizenship education, a heightened focus on civic-oriented projects, and youth participation in reconciliation efforts (Magnuson and Baizerman 2007; Ferreira et al. 2012; Schulz et al. 2010). Across a broad range of developing countries, from Kenya to Malaysia, youth programs are creating opportunities for youth and adults to build social networks, strengthen community institutions, and work together on community projects (Call et al. 2002; Kwan Meng 2012; Nga and King 2006).

A focus on the opportunities embedded in youth programs has brought renewed attention to the assertion that the configuration of youth and adult interactions is critical to the quality and effectiveness of a given setting (Camino 2000; Li and Jullian 2012; Flanagan et al. 2010). And, among these interactions, Y–AP has emerged as a key developmental process and practice. Practitioners claim that Y–AP directly confronts isolation among youth and adults, and equally important, contributes to positive outcomes among young people. Empirical research supports these claims (Wong et al. 2010; Zeldin et al. 2013). These scholars also emphasize, however, that there are no validated measures of Y–AP, and that this gap diminishes knowledge generation and quality practice. It is for these

reasons that we sought to create and test a psychometrically sound measure of youth-adult partnership.

Implications for Theory and Measurement

The present study serves to extend our conceptual and measurement understanding of Y–AP. We constructed a brief measure of Y–AP consisting of two subscales: YVDM and SAR. The two dimensions were explored through factor analysis and tests of factorial, discriminant, and concurrent validity. Results indicate consistent support for the model. Specifically, the subscales of Y–AP demonstrate good internal consistency, are distinct from other elements of program quality (e.g., safety and engagement), and strongly correlate, as predicted, with youth development outcomes (e.g., agency, empowerment). Results further indicate that the predicted model held across youth attending a broad range of community programs within three different countries. This suggests that the measures are applicable to a variety of settings. While the heterogeneity of the sample represents an important strength for validation studies generally (Schaufeli et al. 2002), it may be especially important in studies that examine empowerment and related concepts such as youth voice (Ozer and Schotland 2011). This is the first measurement study of Y–AP, and therefore, a spectrum of conceptual and validation issues should be explored. Foremost, we believe, is the applicability of the measure to different settings. This study assessed Y–AP in the context of youth programs that meet on a regular basis during the after school hours. Y–AP is also implemented, however, in less “structured” settings such as local governance bodies, policy-oriented community coalitions and advocacy-oriented voluntary associations. It is unknown if the current measure would generalize to these settings. We are particularly curious as to the applicability of this measure to issues of school climate and classroom instruction, given that youth participation may be a key component of successful school reform in the United States and internationally (Framework for Success 2006; Fielding 2001; Levin 2000; Mitra 2008).

We also emphasize the need for future research to examine issues of age. This is a conceptual and methodological challenge in all cross-national studies of youth, given that in many nations “youth” are officially designated in national youth policies as persons up to the age of 24, 30 or even 40 years (Kassimir and Flanagan 2010). In this study, the two factor model of Y–AP held across two age ranges (11–18 and 19–24), thus providing preliminary support of the measure’s applicability across age. All participants were “youth,” as defined by their own country, and the age of the sample reflects country-specific socialization expectations for active youth participation. In the United States, for illustration, there are repeated calls for

middle school-age children to partner with adults in participatory action-oriented research (Langhout and Thomas 2010). Such a call would be less likely in many other countries, including Malaysia or Portugal, where “leadership” programs are emphasized during the high school years and beyond to facilitate a transition to adulthood, and where younger youth are more likely to be protected as “learners” during the “middle school” years (Hamilton et al. 2013; Innovations in Civic Participation 2008; Kwan Meng 2012). Replication is warranted with a greater mix of countries and regions to tease out the complex issues of age and nationality as it relates to Y–AP. In making this recommendation, we recognize that “youth” and “adults” are culturally constructed terms. These constructions—the “kaleidoscope” of youth—influence the context of youth development in a myriad of ways that are only partially predictable (Brown and Larson 2002). Based on evidence from earlier studies and the present inquiry, we believe that there are sufficient data to call for future research on how the two dimensions of Y–AP—voice in decision making and SAR—have meaning for and influence on young people. Such research could substantially contribute to more fully understanding the experiences and relationships that underlie the development of agency and empowerment in community programs.

While this study focuses on measurement, we note that the results replicate qualitative inquiries on the positive associations among agency, empowerment and strong youth relationships and partnerships with adults in community programs (Larson and Angus 2011; Zeldin et al. 2005), and thus contributes to the growing body of research showing that Y–AP is strongly connected to agency and empowerment. Y–AP was more modestly correlated with self-esteem and grades. This pattern of results has a conceptual logic to it. The practice of Y–AP, by definition, has both relational and instrumental dimensions to it. It is youths’ exercise of control, in the context of affirmative adult support for critical thinking and collective action that underlies the development of agency and empowerment (Bandura 2006; Hamilton et al. 2013; Maton and Salem 1995). Given the importance of Y–AP, agency, and empowerment to current theoretical conceptions of youth development, research designed to explore causality are especially needed.

Implications for Community Practitioners

The present study indicates that Y–AP is a salient construct in “everyday” youth development programs, not only in those programs and projects that are explicitly oriented toward action or activism. The overall pattern of results suggests that Y–AP can be a common, influential practice across settings and that this measure could be productively

used to help build a comparable body of transdisciplinary knowledge across different types of programs and initiatives.

That said, quality implementation of Y–AP challenges even the most experienced of practitioners (Camino 2005). Y–AP, by intent, is not a “packaged” intervention. Rather, professionals must integrate the principles, values, and strategies of Y–AP into existing programs (e.g., after-school, extracurricular), structures (e.g., governance, planning bodies) and functions (e.g., training, communications, participatory research). The integrative process must also consider the organizational structures in which the program operates (Zeldin et al. 2008). Finally, the challenges to front line workers cannot be minimized. Adults must understand and employ the basic processes of “guided participation.” They must guide, scaffold, and incentivize the learning and reflection of youth, while constantly respond to changes in group dynamics. These processes may take different forms depending on the culture and status of the participants (Krueger 2005; Rogoff 2003).

Because Y–AP is a practice that “looks different” across settings, organizations are often puzzled on how to establish quality in the implementation of Y–AP (Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth 2002; O’Donoghue and Strobel 2007). The newly developed Y–AP measure, we believe, will help managers and front-line workers conceptualize and operationalize the practice to inform policy development, program planning and staff training. By focusing on two core elements of Y–AP—YVDM and SAR—our hope is that the Y–AP measure can also be used by applied researchers to help organizations evaluate their programs and to establish continuous improvement strategies. This measure, consisting of nine items, holds promise for broad use across communities. Its brevity and adoption of field-generated language could help researchers obtain program “buy in” for utilization, thus facilitating practitioner and youth-generated insight into the quality of their own community programs.

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