

## “I’m Hoping That I Can Have Better Relationships”: Exploring Interpersonal Connection for Young Men

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Understanding interpersonal relationships and the skills an individual needs for building and engaging in interpersonal relationships is central to the study of the construct of connection, as an indicator of positive youth development, and to understanding the challenges adolescents face as they transition to adulthood. Accordingly, we conducted a thematic analysis of the reflections about relationships provided by young men beginning postsecondary education. We attended to what they said made these relationships meaningful or important to them, the actions and processes described as part of these relationships, and the role of these relationships in their life plans. Themes identified included indicating closeness through metaphor and hyperbole, connection as feeling close and cared for, emotional expression, talking and listening, putting effort into a relationship, acknowledging difficulty, and improving relationships. We discuss implications of our findings for future research with adolescents and young adults in relation to masculinity ideologies and positive youth development approaches.

*Keywords:* connection, men and masculinity, positive youth development, relationships

Human development is characterized by ongoing, mutually influential relations between individuals and features of their contexts (Lerner, 2004). One of the key elements of the context of human development is other individuals. Thus, understanding interpersonal relationships, and the strengths an individual needs for building and sustaining high quality relationships, is central to the study of human development. The Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective suggests that when the strengths of individuals (e.g., hope; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi,

2000) are aligned with the assets of their contexts (e.g., other individuals; Vygotsky, 1980), young people will thrive—they will exhibit competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015). Young people who are thriving also contribute to their own physical and mental health, to supporting others, and to the broader institutions of society (Lerner et al., 2015).

In the present study, we focus on the operationalization of ‘connection’ as part of PYD, emphasizing connections between individuals, which we term interpersonal connection, in the lives of young men in postsecondary educational contexts. Within PYD, connection has been defined as “positive bonds with people and institutions,” reflected in mutually beneficial exchanges between an individual and the peers, family, school, and community of which the individual’s developmental context is comprised (Lerner et al., 2005). Not all connections are interpersonal connections, as a person may experience connection with an institution or community. Moreover, not all interpersonal relationships are connected relationships—students have relationships with their teachers, for example, but may not feel connected to

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them. Therefore, in this article, we use the term “interpersonal connections” to indicate our focus on interpersonal relationships that appear to involve closeness or a positive bond between people. We explored interviews with young men for their descriptions (a) of their interpersonal connections, (b) of the actions or activities that comprise their contributions to these connections, and (c) of their reflections on the impact of these interpersonal connections in their lives.

We sought to contribute to research on interpersonal connections among young men in particular because connection is primary and fundamental in human life and, furthermore, is shaped in different ways by cultural norms of masculinity and femininity (Bakan, 1966; Gilligan, 1995). Other research has focused on the ways in which norms of femininity may function as both a facilitator and a barrier to interpersonal connection in the experiences of girls and women (e.g., Gilligan & Brown, 1992). Masculinity norms, which include toughness, instrumental effectiveness, emotional stoicism, and homophobia, have been identified as potential barriers to interpersonal connection for adolescent boys, suggesting a need for more exploratory research highlighting what such connection may look like among these boys (Bakan, 1966; Oransky & Fisher, 2009; Pascoe, 2007; Way, 2011). We intend to contribute to this line of research by exploring interpersonal connections in the lives of young men just beyond adolescence. Toward this end, we look not only at instances of interpersonal connection described by these young men, but also at the strengths they bring to their connections—such as relationship skills—and the influences of these interpersonal connections on their lives.

Accordingly, in this article we explore the importance of interpersonal connection, relationship building skills, and the benefits experienced from engaging in such interpersonal connections, through an analysis of semistructured interviews with 60 young men who participated in the Assessment of Character (ACT) Study. The ACT Study is a longitudinal and mixed-method study of trade and community colleges in which many students come from low-income communities (see Johnson et al., 2015). To present our rationale for this research, in the following section we review literature on Connection as one of the ‘Five Cs of PYD,’ and

the ‘C’ that specifically relates to strengths in person–person relations. We then identify research on the Connection of youth to their parents and family, to nonparental adults, and to peers. Finally, we discuss the benefits of using qualitative methodologies to explore interpersonal connection before presenting the methods and findings of this study.

### Person–Context Relations

A relational developmental systems approach to PYD indicates that, when the strengths of young people are aligned with the strengths of their contexts, positive development will occur (Lerner, 2004; Lerner et al., 2015). Such alignment may occur in young people’s relationships with parents, siblings, teachers, mentors, or friends. Indeed, the assets associated with significant individuals in a young person’s context have been identified as the strongest contextual contributors to positive development (J. Lerner et al., 2013; Li & Julian, 2012; Theokas & Lerner, 2006). The strengths of a young person may include behavioral skills (e.g., communication skills, coping with difficulty, goal management; Arbeit, 2014; Bowers et al., 2011) as well as emotional components (e.g., hopeful future expectations; Schmid, Phelps, & Lerner, 2011). The strengths of the individual (e.g., skills, emotions) and the assets of the context (e.g., mentors, teachers, family members, schools) need to be well aligned—there must be goodness of fit (J. Lerner, 1983). When there is goodness of fit, the ongoing, mutual relations between person and context promote positive development (J. Lerner et al., 2013).

In the Five Cs model of PYD, Connection refers both to connection to individuals and to connection to relevant institutions (e.g., schools). In this study, we examine the contextual assets (e.g., the presence of other individuals) and the individual assets (e.g., the individual’s emotions and skills) that together constitute the interpersonal connections described by young men as influencing their lives in positive ways.

### Connection as a “C” of PYD

From the PYD perspective, Connection has been defined as the emotional experience of being in a relationship, such as feeling close to

someone and feeling cared about (Lerner, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005). We use the term interpersonal connection to signify the experience of closeness within a specific relationship; not all relationships are connected relationships. Interpersonal connection can be identified through perceiving affection from other people, experiencing them as caring and concerned, and through the stability and continuation of the bond into the future (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In some relationships (e.g., mentoring relationships), connection grows through authenticity, empathy, joint commitment, and emotional involvement (Rhodes & Lowe, 2009; Spencer, 2006). The experience of such close interpersonal connections (e.g., mentoring relationships, parent–child relationships) is related to self-worth, mental health, and life satisfaction (Resnick et al., 1997; Shernoff, 2013). In the present study, interpersonal connection included relationships with parents and family, important nonparental adults, and peers.

### Parents and Family

Research suggests that parents continue to be a significant part of a young person's life after childhood and through adolescence (Laursen & Collins, 2009). Connection with parents has been assessed as a combination of parental caregiving and child attachment (Bell & Bell, 2009). Caregiving includes social and emotional engagement with young people, support for the development of self-regulation skills, and encouragement in the areas of education and career (Bowers et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2004; Lerner & Benson, 2013). Young people's experience of connection with parents can be crucial to their feelings of belongingness and of being consistently cared for and valued (Bornstein, 2015; Theokas et al., 2005). Family connection in adolescence has been associated with positive outcomes for individual mental health trajectories and for interpersonal relationships in later life (Bell & Bell, 2009). Family connections can include extended family members; for example, the grandparent caregiver role allows for especially close relationships between the grandparent and the grandchild (Ehrle & Day, 1994; Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005). Close connections with siblings are associated with higher peer competence and positive mental health outcomes (Kim et al., 2007) and have

been found to increase during the transition to adulthood (Scharf, Shulman, & Avigad-Spitz, 2005).

### Important Nonparental Adults

Important nonparental adults include teachers, mentors, and coaches, and can include members of the extended family as well. Connections with nonparental adults have been shown to increase positive development by promoting positive emotional, educational, and behavioral outcomes among adolescents and young adults (Bowers et al., 2012; Bowers et al., 2014; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005). Some youth have reported that their nonparental adults expressed higher levels of warmth and acceptance than their peers or parents (Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2011). Indeed, close relationships with nonparental adults were found to be a compensatory factor in promoting positive development for adolescents (Bowers et al., 2014) and young men (Kogan & Brody, 2010) who had problematic parenting profiles. Rhodes (2005) found that positive relationships with important nonparental adults may help youth interpersonally by teaching them how to have positive interactions with others. Developing strong connections with mentors, one important group of nonparental adults, has been found to positively influence the lives of youth by way of role modeling, emotional socialization, and strengthening social relationships, emotional well-being, and cognitive skills (Rhodes, 2002; Spencer, 2006).

### Peer Relationships and Friendships

Throughout adolescence, peer relationships become increasingly significant for both emotional wellness and for a person's trajectory in life (Brown & Larson, 2009). Peer relationships also become more emotionally intimate and meaningful, as young people notice which people stay in their lives throughout different types of changes (Brown & Larson, 2009; Way, 2011). The quality of peer relationships impacts individual development in ways distinct from the mere number of friends a person has (Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, & Carpenter, 2003). Adolescent friendships and romantic relationships can support the development of skills related to intimacy (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Engaging in intimacy involves sharing

one's own thoughts and feelings as well as eliciting and responding to the thoughts and feelings of other people, and can thus be conceived of as a social skill (Arbeit, 2014). Social skills can be defined as the capacity to coordinate cognitions, emotions, and actions in a specific context to fulfill a specific interpersonal function, for example, using direct communication and respecting each other's boundaries (Arbeit, 2014; Fischer & Bidell, 2006). Individuals with stronger social skills have more positive outcomes overall (Brown & Larson, 2009). Friendships marked by strong social skills are related to an increase in positive outcomes and a reduction in potentially problematic indicators, such as depression and risk behaviors (Erdley, Nangle, Newman, & Carpenter, 2001; Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Friendships also provide young people opportunities to explore and confirm their interests and hopes for the future (Rubin, Bukowski, & Bowker, 2015).

### Studying Connection With Adolescent Boys and Young Men

Although closeness and intimacy are generally thought to be associated with adolescent girls' relationships (Rose & Rudolph, 2006), they are also important to the development of adolescent boys and young men. For example, Caldwell and Peplau (1982) found that men and women both value intimacy in same-sex friendships but express this intimacy in different ways. Way (2011) found that adolescent boys valued friendships and, in particular, valued their ability to share their personal thoughts and feelings with their male friends, considering these connections as essential to their health and wellness. Adolescent boys expressed a strong desire for close friendships, and talked about their male friends as "brothers" or "like family" (Way, 2004, 2011). Lee and Robbins (2000) found that college men and women placed the same value on experiencing social connectedness, defined as the subjective experience of interpersonal closeness, but that women overall indicated less loneliness than men (Lee & Robbins, 2000).

Indeed, Way's (2011) longitudinal research found that, as boys went through adolescence into the last years of high school before the transition to adulthood, they began to experience a loss of connection as they were under

increasing pressure to display masculinity and exhibit homophobic behaviors, which barred them from expressing emotional vulnerability in the context of their relationships with other men. The ways in which pervasive masculinity norms such as emotional stoicism interfere with boys' and men's abilities to engage in authentic relationships have been found to be related to health risk outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, and aggressive behavior (Addis, 2008; Chu, Porche, & Tolman, 2005). However, Anderson (2009) studied social contexts for boys in adolescence and young adulthood, and found evidence for a set of social norms he termed "inclusive masculinity," as in a form of masculinity that was inclusive of homosexuality, feminine behaviors, and physical closeness with other men. It is thus possible that, in certain male social contexts, interpersonal connection in general, and interpersonal connection with other young men in particular, may become more or less accessible depending on the attributes of the context and on the individual constructions of and commitments to masculinity ideologies (e.g., Arbeit et al., 2015). Anderson (2009) identified elements of inclusive masculinity in the postsecondary contexts he studied, such as sports teams and fraternities at American and British universities. However, norms of masculinity may be different for youth in contexts that serve students with less social and economic privilege, such as trade schools and community colleges, given class-related pressures and preparation for male-dominated professions (McCormack, 2014).

### The Present Research

Accordingly, this study explored the ways in which young men beginning their postsecondary educations at trade or community colleges reflected on their experiences of interpersonal connection. We focused on Connection because it is stereotypically considered to be an area of strength for young women and an area of deficit for young men (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Indeed, previous qualitative research has indicated that interpersonal connection may be something that young men experience decreased or limited access to in certain contexts (Anderson, 2009; Kimmel, 2009; Pascoe, 2007). In addition, research with young men has typically focused on examining their connec-

tions to parents and peers. Here we expand our focus to include nonparental adults, such as mentors and extended family members. For example, several of these young men grew up in extended family networks in which their primary relationships may have been with relatives other than their parents (Murray, 2009).

Qualitative methodology facilitates the unique contributions of this study. The present study used qualitative methodologies to expand and further contextualize the importance of interpersonal connection among young men entering the transition to adulthood, particularly in terms of their ability to engage in intimacy and the ways in which such intimate and connected relationships shaped their motivation and behavior (Gilligan, 1995; Miller, 1986; Sullivan, 1938). We analyzed the ways in which they reflected on their own behavior and how they discussed building or planning to build relationships in their lives. In this way, qualitative research allows us to attend to the processes that may be relevant for promoting interpersonal connection in young men's lives, with regard to both the strengths of young men and the strengths of their contexts (Futch Ehrlich, 2016, pp. 2–6). As such, our research questions were:

1. Do young men talk about interpersonal connection and its role in their lives? If yes, then what do they describe as the features of these relationships that make them meaningful?
2. What actions and processes are described as part of these relationships?
3. How do their relationships appear to have influenced their life goals?

We implemented a theoretical thematic analysis of interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To address our first research question, we drew upon Lerner and colleagues definition of Connection as positive bonds characterized by the experience of feeling close and cared for (Lerner et al., 2005). Interpersonal connection, as a specific aspect of Connection in general, refers to the formation of positive bonds with other individuals in the context. We therefore analyzed these data with particular attention to how participants identified the important individuals in their contexts, and how they communicated which relationships were important or meaningful. To respond to our second research question,

we focused on actions, processes, and challenges that participants reported within their relationships (e.g., Charmaz, 2006). To frame this analysis, we used the framework that PYD results from the alignment of the strengths of the individual with the strengths of the context (Lerner et al., 2015). We therefore explored our data for evidence of participants' individual contributions to their ongoing mutual relations, including evidence of the skills they used or considered using, as well as the ways in which they experienced or expressed emotions, in building interpersonal connections. Skills and emotions were selected as areas of focus given their salience both in the data and in the conceptual model of PYD, which highlights skills such as intentional self regulation (Bowers et al., 2011) and emotions such as hope for the future (Schmid, Phelps, & Lerner, 2011). In this model, skills involve a coordination of both cognitions and actions (Fischer & Bidell, 2006). To address our third research question, we attended to participants' own meaning-making around their relationships and their descriptions of how these relationships may have influenced their life goals and plans for the future. Consideration of gender as an element of person–context relations also informed our rationale for the study and our interpretation of our findings. We did not conduct gendered analyses of the data explicitly, but our observation of young men's experience of gender in relation to their interpersonal connections is reflected in our presentation of findings and in the Discussion.

## Method

The data for the current investigation were collected during the first wave of the Assessment of Character (ACT) Study (Johnson et al., 2015). The ACT Study aims to assess character, civic, and vocational development in a sample of young men attending trade and community colleges in the greater Philadelphia area. The study uses a longitudinal and convergent mixed-method research design (Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark, & Smith, 2011). Full details regarding ACT can be found elsewhere (i.e., Johnson et al., 2015). Here we describe the method related to the qualitative data collection and analyses conducted in ACT, from which the current investigation developed.

## Participants

Participants included 60 young men from greater Philadelphia ( $M_{\text{age}} = 18.80$  years,  $SD = 1.43$ ). Self-identified race was obtained from 52 of the 60 participants. Of these 52 participants, 41 self-identified as White/Caucasian, three as Black/African American, one as East Asian or Pacific Islander, two as Hispanic/Latino, two as South Asian or Indian, one as Other, and two as Multi-Ethnic or Multi-Racial. Participants were first-year students recruited from four postsecondary schools. Thirty students came from the Williamson College of the Trades<sup>1</sup> (WC). WC has 300 students across five areas of study, and students may earn Associate degrees or Certificates. The school admits male students only, who attend on full scholarship and live at the school for the duration of their studies. In addition, all students are exposed to character and citizenship training. An additional 30 students were recruited from three other postsecondary institutions in greater Philadelphia, 10 from each school. We use pseudonyms to refer to these three schools, as well as to all of the participants. Technical College (TC) is a trade school with approximately 300 students, and offers 15 Associates in Science or Applied Science degrees. Community College (CC) has approximately 10,000 students, and offers 58 Associates in Science, Associates in Arts, and Certificate programs. State College (SC) is a branch of a large state university, has more than 1,500 students, and offers 15 Associates degrees and Bachelor degrees.

## Procedure

**Recruitment.** At WC, we conducted interviews with a random sample of 30 first-year students during their orientation, in late August, 2012. We randomly selected 30 students, and provided the list of selected students to the Dean of Enrollments, who privately contacted each student to ask whether he would be willing to participate. Only one student from the initial list of 30 declined, so we repeated the random selection process to identify another potential participant. The Dean of Enrollments informed the selected students that participation was voluntary, that their relationship with WC would not be affected by whether they chose to participate, and that they could make a final decision about

participation at the time of the interview. Students had an interview scheduled into their orientation at a time when other students would be participating in various activities; staff members (except the Dean of Enrollments) would thus be unable to determine whether students were participating.

In addition to the 30 WC students, we aimed to recruit 10 students from each of the three other schools who had completed the ACT survey. We randomly selected students from among the survey participants and contacted them to see whether they would participate in a semistructured interview. Three of the initially selected students had not provided adequate contact information on the survey, 18 never returned phone calls or responded to our e-mails, and two directly declined to participate in an interview. We continued to randomly select participants from the list until we had successfully scheduled interviews with 10 students from each of the three schools. These interviews were conducted between September 2012 and January 2013.

**The interview process.** Interviews were conducted by six female graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. To elicit richer interviews, we kept the gender of the interviewer consistent and chose interviewers who intended to contribute to the ACT Study for all three years of the project, so that they might better establish a rapport with participants over time. Research suggests that female interviewers can be successful at interviewing young men, although gender of the interviewer may matter less than the interviewer's awareness of gender and of the interview process (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001). Accordingly, the interviewers were trained in qualitative interviewing and they met with each other on a regular basis before, during, and after the week when interviews were conducted to discuss the protocol.

All participants gave their informed consent, and the interviews lasted 30 to 90 min. Interview participants were compensated with a \$50 gift card. Each of the interviewers followed the same semistructured interview protocol (described below). Interviews were tape recorded,

<sup>1</sup> Our partner institution in this study, the Williamson College of the Trades, has requested to be named in all research publications.

professionally transcribed, and checked by the study team for errors.

**The interview protocol.** The interview began with a life narrative task (adapted from Habermas, 2007). Participants were prompted to write down the five to seven most important events that had ever happened in their lives (the exact number was chosen by the participant and thus varied across interviews). Then, they used those events to guide them in telling the interviewer a story about their lives so far. Interviewers followed up with questions about the life narrative they had shared. The semistructured interview protocol addressed participants' high school experiences, their reasons for choosing their school, their expectations and hopes for their experiences at school, and their future life goals. For example, we asked: "Tell me about the most important relationships in your life during high school. What made those relationships important to you? How do you think they will change in the coming year?" We then probed for peer relationships, and family, school, and other relationships. We also asked about the role of these relationships in their educational decision-making. Because the interviews were semistructured, not every interviewer asked these questions in the exact same way, and interviewers were instructed to follow the lead of the participant (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Discussions of significant individuals and meaningful relationships arose throughout these interviews. Therefore, the responses analyzed in the present study were taken from across the interview transcripts, including the life narratives and the follow-up questions.

### Analysis Plan

We followed the steps of thematic analysis described by Boyatzis (1998) and Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involved an iterative coding of the data using Nvivo10 Software (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013), and the construction of themes from the coded data. Below, we describe the codebook we developed to guide our initial analyses, and how we moved from applying these codes to constructing the themes with which we organized our findings.

**Coding data.** We developed the codebook through iterative analyses of the data and discussion among our research team. We began by reading each of the 60 interviews and identify-

ing segments of the interviews that referred to love and relationships. Through continual discussion, we developed the basis of our codebook, which included in vivo codes, such as "feeling the same," and "spending time together," as well as more descriptive codes, such as "recognizing the impact of another person" (Saldaña, 2012). Our theoretical framework of PYD also influenced our codebook.

We coded the first six (10%) interviews and met to review the respective applications of the codes to the data and to ensure that our insights into the data were reflected in the codes and in their definitions (in keeping with a diversity coding method, Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The codebook was adjusted through merging, editing, adding, and removing codes that no longer seemed relevant to addressing the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the codebook was established, the interviews were divided between two authors. After the coding was completed, the research team met to review the most frequently used codes. Finally, we constructed themes from the coded data (as described below).

**Auditing and memoing.** The second author, a qualitative methodologist, served as an auditor of the coding process (see Johnson et al., 2015; Riessman, 2008). She provided guidance to the coding team about memoing throughout their coding of the data and about how to incorporate insights from their memos in the revising of codes (Boyatzis, 1998). The coauthors systematically wrote memos that included technical questions (e.g., about using the codebook) as well as analytic insights into the data (e.g., about patterns identified across interviews). Memos provided another means of increasing the rigor of the coding process and aiding the development of explanatory themes (Riessman, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Thematic analysis.** For this portion of analysis we ran queries in Nvivo10 for the codes that (a) had the most coverage in the data set, and (b) were most related to describing interpersonal connection. These codes included "describing the relationship," "sharing a past/perspective," "being cared for," and "acknowledging difficulty." After generating these queries, we met to review these data and the related memos. Through discussion, we developed connections between codes, and further refined these insights until arriving at an agreement

about the main themes in the data that addressed our research questions (Boyatzis, 1998).

**Validity.** To ensure rigor in our analyses, we used verification strategies to help identify when to continue and when to modify our research process (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). One strategy we used was investigator responsiveness, in other words, remaining open throughout the analysis process and letting go of ideas that were not held true by the data (Morse et al., 2002). For example, we let go of our original belief that “feeling the same” and “sharing a past” were substantively different emotions and experiences for these young men and, instead, merged the two codes. Another strategy was methodological coherence, which means we iteratively discussed our questions, method, and data to ensure they were all aligned with the thematic analysis approach (Morse et al., 2002). Finally, we consistently checked and rechecked our ideas with each other to confirm and reconfirm the coding and thematic development.

## Results

We present our findings organized by research questions, which guided our exploration of the ways in which participants described their relationships as meaningful, of their individual contributions to building and maintaining relationships, and of how they perceived the influence of their relationships on their life paths.

### Research Question 1: Identifying Relationships as Meaningful

Our first research question had two parts: Do young men talk about interpersonal connection and its role in their lives? If yes, then what do they describe as the features of these relationships that make them meaningful (i.e., what characterizes these relationships as interpersonal connections)? To address these questions, we attended to the particular words participants used to identify relationships that they valued. We also focused on the content of participants’ descriptions of their close relationships. We observed three themes: relationship closeness as reflected in language, the role of time in developing and sustaining

interpersonal connection, and connection as feeling close and cared for.

**Relationship closeness as reflected in language about relationships.** In the interviews, the participants described their close relationships with the use of metaphors and/or hyperbole in reference to a particular individual in their lives.

**Indicating closeness through metaphor.** One way in which participants indicated that relationships were important to them was by cross-referencing other forms of relationships. In describing his friends as family, Nick (WC) explained that his “best friend . . . was like my brother” because “I didn’t have any siblings until ’08” and “I was at his house all the time; he was at my house.” Nick’s comments reflected his belief that a characteristic of relationships between siblings was spending time together in the home, which he did with this friend. Participants also used the metaphor of “best friends” to describe their close relationships with certain family members. Ryan (WC) talked about “becoming best friends with my grandma . . . whenever she always babysat me.” His use of the metaphor of best friend demonstrated the closeness he experienced with his grandmother, beyond her role as a caretaker. These metaphors suggest that the connections these young men experienced surpassed the specific roles that different people filled in their lives and achieved a deeper level of importance or status.

**Speaking in hyperbole while describing the relationships.** Another way in which participants described the strengths of their connections to particular individuals was by using language that indicated extreme experiences of closeness. For example, Tim (WC) got a tattoo with three stars that “represents [my uncle], me, and my brother being united as one because we’re just unbelievably close.” Tim signaled the importance of these relationships to him through using the hyperbolic language of “unbelievable,” through the metaphor of being “united as one,” and with the permanent physical marking of a tattoo. Mike (WC) said that he “had a cousin” who is “one of my best friends, and I plan on being friends with him my whole life.” Mike experienced this connection as one that would continue far into the future, indicating the value he placed on that connection and his commitment to it. References to time were

echoed throughout other ways in which participants identified their relationships as meaningful, as well.

**The role of time in the development and maintenance of interpersonal connections.** Participants described the role of time in their close relationships in two ways. They reflected on how (a) having a shared history, and (b) spending all their time together during a specific point in their development (past or present) characterized the close relationships in their lives.

**Having a shared history.** The participants spoke about having a history with someone as contributing to their experience of the strength and meaning of the connection. Jake (WC) reflected “it’s different because the people I grew up with, I have more of a connection with” because with those people, “you got things to reminisce about and childhood memories.” Jake’s comment suggests that he actually would talk to his friends about the past, and would experience positive feelings while doing so. Dan (WC) said that there was “one person” he knew “since I was four” and that “we’ve always been the best of friends.” As a result, over time, “we brought everybody into our group” such that “our whole group of friends have really based off us.” In other words, the longevity of their friendship meant that their connection with each other became core to building other connections in their lives.

**Being together “all the time”.** The participants referred to how much time they spent with a particular person as an indication of the strength of their connection. Spending time together appeared to support interpersonal connection reciprocally; more time with others seemed to allow for a stronger connection, and a stronger connection also seemed to motivate people to choose to spend more time together. Leo (WC) had “a real small circle” and “we hang out all the time.” He added: “If there’s nothing going on, we just stay with us.” This additional comment suggests that the meaning of spending time together is separate from doing any particular activity. Drew (TC) expressed feeling “very fortunate” to have consistent meals with his family, which facilitated “a good connection.” He mentioned both the fact that “every night we were always together for supper . . . with our parents,” and he noted “the big family dinner” that happened “every Sunday” with “grandparents, parents.” References to

shared history and being together “all” the time indicate the ways in which these young men experienced their own lives as intertwined with the lives of others; these other people were integral to the ways in which they constructed meaning of their own past and present. The gratitude that Drew expressed when talking about family dinners was echoed in other participants’ reflections on the ways in which they felt cared for by others.

**Connection as feeling close and cared for.** Participants spoke about both practical and emotional ways in which they felt attended to and cared for by others. Dan (WC) reflected on the ways in which his grandmother supported him not only through her constant presence, “she was always in my life,” but also in the ways in which “she kept me,” as in, she kept him focused and moving forward in his life: “She always stayed on my back and always pushed me to do something, to make sure all my homework’s done.” As a result of this ongoing support, affirming presence, and motivation, Dan reflected, “it caused me to do good.” Jake (WC) reflected that he “never really paid attention” to the way in which his mother was “such a hard-working woman” who “really goes out of her way for me . . . makes a lot of sacrifices.” As a result, and perhaps related to him beginning the transition into adulthood, Jake asserted: “I’m trying to make her happy now and repay her.”

Participants also received care and support from people who were not their parents. Sean (CC) talked about a person who had been his caseworker who “helped me get my life back on track on my junior year” as he moved around different foster homes. Evan (WC) talked about his cousin who “helps me out as much as he can” in coping with school: “He calls me every now and then just gives me little tips and stuff. Like the first night he called and asked me how I was doing and how I liked it so far.” This reflection indicates that his cousin offered both practical aid and emotional presence. These comments reflect the ways in which Miller (1986) describes motivation and action as building from interpersonal connections, as these young men describe how the experience of caring enabled them to do the work they needed to do and motivated them to keep going.

## Research Question 2: Individual Contributions to Interpersonal Connections

Our second research question was: What actions and processes are described as part of interpersonal connections? To address this question, we attended to the processes participants described engaging in as they reflected on the close relationships they had built. We focused on identifying individual strengths through which the participants may have contributed to building and maintaining their interpersonal connections. The strengths we identified included emotional expression, talking and listening, putting effort into relationships, acknowledging difficulty in relationships, and working to improve relationships.

**Emotional expression as part of close relationships.** Many young men described the expression of both positive and difficult emotions in their relationships. When Jake (WC) graduated from high school after his mother worried that he might not, he remembered “that made her very happy, and that made me happy seeing her happy, so that was real good.” His emotional experience responded to his perception of hers. Conversely, Dave (WC) reflected on the emotions expressed during his move, saying that his younger brother “wouldn’t admit it,” but, “I think he feels sad” even though he was focused on being “happy to move into my room.” Dave’s comment demonstrates that he understood that his brother might have been experiencing challenging emotions that he was not ready to express. The expression or experience of emotions, in this way, can be understood as also related to developing skills. Expressing emotions may require a series of coordinated actions that result in experiencing vulnerability and maintaining strong bonds with others through that experience of vulnerability and, in response, through providing mutual support.

**Talking and listening to each other.** Emotional support provided through talking and listening appeared to characterize the meaningful relationships in which these young men were engaged. Dave (WC) said the he and his stepsister were “really close” and that “she is actually the only older girl that I’ll actually talk to and listen to, stuff like that.” Ryan reflected how “talking to my mom, my counselors, and again my grandma” was how he “got through” a hardship he was experiencing. However, Jake (WC) also experi-

enced a “rough point in my life” in which he would “have talks” with his father, who “taught me life is just not easy” but “to every problem, there’s a solution, just sticking it out through tough times, you just man it up to every situation . . . you just have to go through it and do your best.” The messages his father delivered, though “very inspirational,” also may have reinforced gendered norms of behavior such as having to “man up” to “every situation.” This term implies constant effort and self-reliance, instead of seeking support from others to address challenges (Bakan, 1966). For some, these masculinity norms can function to distance them from the people they would otherwise be close to and from whom they could receive support (Oransky & Fisher, 2009; Way, 2011).

Several participants reported that nonparental adults played important roles for them. Dave (WC) said: “I could just go to my mentor and talk to him and then he would talk to my dad, and . . . he would put my words in a type of way that my dad could understand.” Dave reflected that being able to talk to his mentor “just made things a lot easier for me, and I felt like I could tell him anything and talk about everything.” In this instance, talking to his mentor allowed Dave to access both emotional support and instrumental support (Karcher et al., 2006), in that his mentor would then provide him with the help he needed to communicate with his father. Both confiding in his mentor and accepting help with his father represent valuable relationship skills. Sean (CC) built rapport with a teacher at school, to the extent that “I could always tell her everything, and she could always be truthful with me about it, and it was just really spur of the moment.” Sean provided evidence of an experience of mutual authenticity within this connection, that he could tell her what felt true to him and that he could expect truthfulness in response.

Sam (WC) valued talking openly with the person who was his “best friend.” As Sam explained: “If something’s wrong in my life, I go straight to him, something’s wrong in his life, he’s straight to me.” Sam’s comment indicated also that he experienced equity in the relationship, that they both needed each other and they both supported each other. Sam valued the feeling that “I always have someone with me . . . that’s just a huge part of my life.” These comments reflect the ways in which these young

men valued their skills for engaging in intimacy, for sharing their thoughts and feelings with each other, intentionally investing in their relationships to build stronger connections.

**Putting effort into a relationship.** Several young men talked about purposeful effort as part of building meaningful interpersonal connections. Luke (SC) understood that in his long-distance family relationships, he was expected to put effort into staying “in contact”: “If I don’t call this week, they’ll call and yell at me next week.” This reflection suggested a feeling of accountability for his efforts in the relationship. Similarly, Nick (WC) held his girlfriend accountable by talking to her when he felt she was not putting effort into the relationship. Nick shared: “I told her, a relationship is a two-way street. You’re making it a one-way. And I told her I feel like I’m in a relationship by myself.” For Nick, feeling that his girlfriend was putting effort into the relationship was important to him, and important enough that he would take the risk of talking to her about what he perceived as a lack of effort on her part to maintain the connection they had developed. Without further context, it is possible that these urges to put more effort into a relationship were also experienced as negative or guilt-inducing pressure. Nevertheless, participants described putting effort into their relationships and conveyed that they expected similar levels of effort and commitment from others, reflecting a conception of effort as an aspect of an individual’s contribution to building and maintaining interpersonal connections.

**Acknowledging difficulty in relationships.** Indeed, for participants in this study, forming interpersonal connection was an active and dynamic process that they contributed to, for their relationships to be of high quality. In several instances, their contributions involved acknowledging the difficulties occurring in the relationships, including both current emotional conflicts and hurt feelings from past relationships.

Although we identified emotional expression as a strength of young men’s contributions to their relationships, some participants reflected beliefs that their own emotional experiences and related challenges made it difficult for other people to be close to them. Dave (WC) identified ways in which his own emotions could pose challenges to interpersonal connection. He said, “When something comes along and it does get

to me, I get very angry on the inside.” But then, if “you come and try to talk to me,” his response would be, “not today, I’m not trying to talk to you.” He reflected that “some guys” would then “keep on nagging” him to talk, and “then I’ll explode.” When he felt that kind of strong anger toward someone, he did not know how to stay in connection with that person. This behavior was complicated for Dave because, though he described removing himself from connection as an act of self-preservation, this strategy did not always get him what he needed, especially if he later reacted in anger and did not have the opportunity to reconnect with that person. When Ryan (WC) spoke about his relationship with his father, he also described challenging emotions, but he appeared to have strategies for managing them. Ryan worked for his father, and said, “It’s hard with your boss being your dad and then also being your dad at home . . . we get our arguments now and then.” But when that happened, “he knows” and Ryan knows that “it’s just pressure and frustration.” Ryan accepted that he and his father may be frustrated with each other sometimes. In addition, he had the ability to manage having more than one type of connection, in this case, a parent–child connection and a boss–employee connection. Dave, in contrast, appeared to struggle to find ways to manage his negative emotions and reactions to maintain his interpersonal connections.

Several young men reflected on negative emotions that developed as a result of getting hurt within the context of a past interpersonal connection. Andy (WC) was having trouble because “a lot of people just didn’t like” his girlfriend. He wondered, “Maybe they’re jealous because a bunch of them tried to talk to her and some of them got mad because she didn’t like them.” He struggled with these “mixed feelings” between him and his friends about this new romance. Dan (WC) had challenges with his mother, who left and then returned. As he was rebuilding his connection with her, he acknowledged, “I don’t trust her completely yet.” However, even though Dan acknowledged this hurt, he felt he was “getting a lot better” and that “as long as she doesn’t do anything for the next year or so, I’ll believe that she’s settled down and relaxed.” Although Dan still felt hurt by his mother, he was also willing to be patient and gradually rebuild their connection and trust. Nick (WC) expressed how the hurt from his past

relationships was making it difficult for him to build new connections. He said: "I don't have that many friends because it seems like a lot of people that I've become close with, something happens, so I just try to block a lot of people out." These examples demonstrate that intimacy skills involve not only investing in a relationship when connection is at its strongest, but also having the capacity to cope with periods of disconnection and to rebuild mutual understanding and mutual support if possible.

**Improving relationships.** The intention to improve relationships combines aspects of acknowledging difficulty with the idea that relationships take effort. Cole (SC) took pride in the changes he experienced within himself. He reflected: "I've actually been opening up to people, which I feel has been a personal achievement." He was proud of his ability to put in the effort and make interpersonal connection possible. Luis (CC) said, "I've never been good at relationships. That's a problem I have. I'm hoping that I can have better relationships." Luis described his relationships with the important people in his life, from friends to dating partners to family. He wanted to improve his ability to connect with people overall and to improve specific connections that mattered to him. These comments reflected the young men's attunement to the quality of their relationships and to the role of emotions—their own and others—in shaping the experience of being in connection. These comments also reflected the ways in which the young men valued their connections and took responsibility for their own contributions to how close and strong those connections were. These emotions, vulnerabilities, and skills constitute the individual contributions to the person–context relations (specifically, person–person relations) that form interpersonal connections. Through emotional expression and relationship skills, young men actively work to build and maintain meaningful interpersonal connections.

### Research Question 3: Relationships and Life Goals

Our third research question was: How do participants' relationships appear to have influenced their life goals? To answer this question, we focused our analyses on young men's retrospective reflections and the goals and plans they

described at the time of the interview. We identified the ways in which they believed people in their lives shaped their pursuit of their goals, for example, through pursuing shared interests alongside them, by providing direct help and guidance, and by motivating them to work hard and stay on course.

Many participants spoke about pursuing their life goals alongside other people with whom they were closely connected. Chris (WC) had a friend in high school who "started his path towards hard work a little bit before mine" and "got me into the idea of doing the debate team . . . and doing all this other stuff." Ron (SC) reflected that his professional interests "all started out with my dad and my grandfather—they were both engineers and that kind of inspired me to become an engineer, too." He remembered, "We always used to do a lot of projects . . . that's where I was interested in doing those projects." Chris and Ron developed their personal interests in the context of their interpersonal connections. Evan (WC) said that his "family" was "always helping me with stuff." Specifically, "they have always been on me about school, and [how] you've got to get an education and go somewhere in life." For example, his family told him, "If you don't get in [to school] . . . reapply and just try again." Evan's reflections included the combination of emotional motivation he received from his family to "go somewhere in life," in general, and the practical help they provided as he thought through what he would do if he did not achieve his goal on the first try. Evan's close connections with his family shaped his experience of goal pursuit and persistence. Dan (WC) talked about his father urging him to stay in school and finish. He commented: "My dad's like, 'Don't come home!' But he's joking; he just wants me to finish. The rest of my family said that's smart; even my uncles who graduated from here said that's smart." He felt the weight of these family connections urging him to finish.

Whether pursuing interests together, receiving help directly, or being urged to stay on course, it was through the strength of connections that these other individuals had such an impact on these young men's lives. In these ways, participants' responses begin to illustrate how Connection influenced their life trajectories, such that they were directed toward achieving positive outcomes, including education and career goals.

## Discussion

The theoretical framework of PYD assesses the ways in which the strengths of individuals, when aligned with the strengths of their contexts (including individuals within their contexts), promote thriving (Lerner et al., 2015). In the present study, we analyzed reflections on person–person relations, as an aspect of person–context relations, to further explore the importance and meaning of Connection as a component of positive development. Recent scholarship has emphasized the need to understand interpersonal connection among boys and the challenges they face in their relationships during later adolescence (e.g., Way, 2011). Accordingly, we conducted a thematic analysis of interviews with young men to gain a unique perspective on the ways in which young men engage with the other people in their lives to produce their own positive development.

### Relating Our Findings to Past Research

Our findings elaborate upon extant research addressing the meanings, processes, and potential impacts of interpersonal connections in young people’s lives.

**Making relationships meaningful.** Participants indicated the meaning of a relationship through describing an individual as filling more than one relational role in their lives. Specifically, they used the metaphor of family to indicate closeness with their friends, and they used the label of “best friend” to indicate closeness with family members such as grandmothers or sisters. Theokas and Lerner (2006) found that the presence of other people is the strongest contextual asset to promote positive development. The findings of the present study indicate that relationships and valued others can play multiple roles or have dual meanings for young people. The linguistic metaphors reflected in descriptions of relationships and experiences may reflect specific psychological representations that structure a person’s thoughts and feelings within that relationship (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). More research is needed to determine the developmental relevance of meaningful relationships that cross over different categories of family, friend, and mentor. One example of such research is the study of how athletic coaches can serve also as mentors, potentially

aiding positive development through enhancing young people’s life skills in addition to their athletic abilities (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; see also Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016, pp. 2–6).

In examining what marks relationships as important and meaningful (Gilligan, 1995), we identified ways in which the young men reflected on their experiences of feeling close to someone and feeling cared for, which is the definition of Connection as a C of PYD (Lerner et al., 2015). Reflections on feeling close and cared for included references to emotional support and to encouragement for pursuing life goals. These findings can inform the conceptualization of Connection as a C of PYD, and further research could be directed to elaborate on young men’s meaning-making within these experiences of closeness and care.

**Actions and processes in relationships.** We identified several themes that illustrate the actions and processes that are part of the ways in which young men contribute to building and maintaining the interpersonal connections in their lives. As evidenced in other research on PYD, individual contributions to person–context relations take the form of both individual skills and emotional or affective orientations (Schmid, Phelps, & Lerner, 2011). We identified many ways in which young men contribute to building and maintaining intimacy (Sullivan, 1938) through their emotional presence and vulnerability. These findings relate to Way’s (2011) research on the ways in which adolescent boys engage in friendships by talking about their feelings and sharing secrets with each other. Participants identified sharing their feelings and providing mutual support as important aspects of their experience of their connections. They also talked about emotional challenges in relationships, such as coping with having been hurt in the past and managing negative feelings of anger and frustration that arise within current connections. Thus, this research extends Way’s findings to demonstrate evidence of emotional strengths among young men as they transition into adulthood.

Participants also noted that relationships take effort. Such effort may involve taking the risk of emotional vulnerability, and also utilizing a particular set of skills for building the kinds of intimacy that facilitate such vulnerability (Sullivan, 1938). Participants wanted, and sought to build, skills for building intimacy and improv-

ing relationships, such as opening up to people and managing conflict. These findings illustrate the ways in which dynamic skills constitute individual contributions to person–context relations in the formation of young people’s intimate relationships (Arbeit, 2014; Fischer & Bidell, 2006). Furthermore, a focus on dynamic skills within PYD understandings of connection helps to reframe the concept of risk in relationships. Even given the potential for hurt and harm, risks in relationships may also contain positive potential for building individual skills and for strengthening interpersonal connections.

**Relationships shaping life plans.** We found that participants described many ways in which their relationships contributed to and shaped their life plans. The young men talked about their interpersonal connections providing inspiration and motivation (Miller, 1986), support, and companionship as they selected and pursued goals. These findings align with the mentoring literature in demonstrating some of the ways in which Connection can have an impact on individual life trajectories. That is, caring adults can help young people learn skills and achieve specific goals (i.e., instrumental mentoring; Karcher et al., 2006) and also help young people by facilitating social, cognitive, and emotional development (i.e., developmental/relational mentoring, Karcher et al., 2006). Therefore, further research can be designed to assess young men’s reflections on how their relationships with mentors, and their other relationships, have shaped their life paths with regard to not only their career goals but also their personal well-being, indexed by mental health and behavioral outcomes (Addis, 2008; Chu et al., 2005). Such research could also attend to the ways in which masculinity norms constrain and facilitate young men’s interpersonal connections.

**Interpreting gender.** Endorsing masculinity ideologies as these young men transition to adulthood may contribute to loss of authenticity in relationships, loss of closeness with peers, and barriers to receiving care and support from others (Chu et al., 2005; Kimmel, 2009; Way, 2011). We found some evidence of the ways in which masculinity norms may be confirmed or perpetuated within the context of interpersonal connections. For example, one young man’s father told him to “man up” as a way to solve his problems, which may imply turning away from emotional truths and may reinforce a requirement of masculine

toughness and stoicism (Katz, 2006; Kimmel, 2009). We also found that the men valued space to be emotional and to express their feelings for or about others, and that they emphasized emotional sharing and mutual support as characteristics of their closest and most influential relationships. Even within a cultural context that devalues such instances of vulnerability in relation to men and masculinity (Kimmel, 2009; Pascoe, 2007), these findings indicate that young men have the capacity to invest in relationships, to build skills for emotional intimacy, and to give and receive care and support. One particularly salient example is the way in which our findings related to emotional expression in relationships: the young men expressed responsiveness to their perceptions of how other people were feeling in the contexts of their close connections. Another salient example is that the young men described their sisters and grandmothers as their best friends, which indicates that they value emotional intimacy with female relatives. These building blocks of closeness, caring, and empathy that young men have with other men and with the women in their lives may be a resource for directly addressing the problematic elements of masculinity norms, including both the ways in which men reinforce these norms with each other (Kimmel, 2009; Pascoe, 2007) and the ways in which the developmental challenges associated with masculinity norms impact men’s violence against women (Katz, 2006).

### Building Connections Among Young Men

This research provides a foundation for designing a PYD approach to promoting interpersonal connection in the lives of adolescent boys and young men. The present research demonstrates not only the variety of individuals that may be important in the lives of boys but also the variety of ways in which those individuals may be meaningful, particularly when they fulfill multiple roles in a young person’s life and maintain their presence over time and place. This research also indicates individual assets that contribute to young men’s ability to build, maintain, and invest in their relationships. Individual assets may take the form of skills, such as acknowledging difficulty and working to improve relationships, and they also may take the form of emotional processes such as emotional expression, vulnerability, and mutual support.

These individual and contextual assets may contribute to the development of interpersonal connection, feeling close with and cared for by significant others. In turn, experiences of interpersonal connection may have a positive influence on an individual's life path.

Individuals and programs looking to build connections with young men may need to address their personal histories of hurt, anger, and fear in the context of seeking connections, and their struggles with how to open up and experience vulnerability. A PYD approach to promoting interpersonal connection in the lives of young men could also account for and directly address masculinity ideologies and could support young men in developing relevant skills. For example, we heard from participants that talking and listening in the context of relationships is particularly meaningful. Allowing specific time and a structured space for young men to communicate in a safe and open environment could help them to reflect on and address hurt from relationships while providing the opportunity to build new supportive relationships with peers and with mentors. Such an approach would need to consider both the role of masculinity norms within specific contexts (e.g., schools, Anderson, 2009) and also the function of masculinity norms that young men may have internalized (e.g., promoting interpersonal violence, Katz, 2006). In addition, further research can examine differences in the implications for how boys and men form relationships with other boys and men compared with how they form relationships with girls and women. More research is needed to explore how individual and contextual gender constructions may constrain and facilitate this process of young men engaging in, experiencing, and benefiting from interpersonal connection.

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

This study provides a valuable foundation for future research and applications. Its strength includes taking a positive perspective on analyzing young men's involvement in interpersonal connections, rather than approaching young men's relationships from a deficit perspective. Qualitative methods also allowed us to listen to the words of young men to deepen our understanding of the concept of interpersonal connection and of the context through which

young men access interpersonal connections. Furthermore, qualitative research facilitated our attending to their meaning-making about how their relationships contributed to their life paths.

We interviewed these young men during the transition to adulthood, as they began their postsecondary education. Using both life narrative and semistructured approaches in the interviews facilitated exploring relationships in the context of their reflections about their lives in the past, their experience during this pivotal transition, and their thoughts about the future. Furthermore, the participants have educational experiences that are not conventionally represented on the majority of university campuses or in research on higher education (e.g., trade education and community colleges).

However, the present study also has specific limitations to address in future research. The interviews were not designed solely to study interpersonal connection, although the life narrative task lent itself well to the participants describing important relationships in their lives, and we asked follow-up questions prompting more specific reflections. Given the findings of the present study, future research should directly examine individual and contextual assets that contribute to interpersonal connection. Such studies could use qualitative and/or quantitative instruments to assess individual assets such as skills, emotions, and openness in relationships, and contextual assets such as individuals and inclusive masculinity norms. These studies could also directly assess the number of important connections identified by each participant. In the present thematic analysis, we did not include counts of how many people were referred to by each of the young men in the study. Such counts could contribute to identifying the developmental differences between having one high-quality interpersonal connection in comparison to a network of relationships.

Another limitation of the present study is that we did not analyze for the direct connection between masculinity and relationships. However, such questions could be designed for future study based on the findings of the present research. In addition, longitudinal research could explore the role of masculinity ideologies in shaping young men's engagement in relationships overtime; the present research was retrospective but not longitudinal. Future research could follow these young men in their postsecondary educational experi-

ences, to see whether they continue to pursue and build relationships in the ways in which they said they wanted to, and to see how the relationships continue to shape their life trajectories and well-being. Future research could also more deeply examine young men's own meaning-making of how relationships shape their life trajectories, which can be an important gauge of how such experiences *actually* influence an individual's development (Bruner, 2004).

Future research should also be designed that is more person-centered and context-specific and informs theorizing about how characteristics of participants and their contexts may differentially influence their interpersonal connection. Such research could potentially allow for a more explicit analysis of how gender, race, and class together shape the relational experiences of young men. In the present research, students were from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (although they were predominately white) but because of a lack of information about how students experienced these characteristics, we could not adequately account for how these factors may have played a part in their relationships with others. Research that is context-specific could also allow for studying dyadic interactions and speaking with two participants about their relationships with each other, whether student-student relationships or student-teacher relationships. These forms of critical, intersectional, and dynamic research can contribute to the formation of a PYD approach to promoting Connection while accounting for contextualized gender ideologies and internalized gender norms in young men.

Analyzing the ways in which young men engage in interpersonal connection, and the ways in which young men's interpersonal connections are shaped by gender ideologies, has implications for promoting their health and well-being, and the health and well-being for young people of all genders. Girls and young women, too, are impacted by the ways in which masculinity ideologies shape the interpersonal behaviors of the men in their lives. Although we could not go into great detail about how these gender ideologies may be influencing young men's interpersonal connection, this study contributes both to PYD research with youth, and to the burgeoning field of qualitative methods. We generated in-depth information about participants' different kinds of meaningful relationships and the processes through

which they actively contribute to their relationships and are influenced by them. This study can provide a foundation for future research bridging PYD perspectives and qualitative methodologies, in the service of enhancing research and practice aimed at fostering vulnerability, intimacy, and positive experiences of interpersonal connection for all youth.

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