



## Advancing a participatory approach for youth risk behavior: Foundations, distinctions, and research directions<sup>☆</sup>



Marlys J. Mason<sup>a,\*</sup>, John F. Tanner<sup>b</sup>, Maria Piacentini<sup>c</sup>, Dan Freeman<sup>d</sup>, Trena Anastasia<sup>e</sup>, Wided Batat<sup>f</sup>, Wendy Boland<sup>g</sup>, Murad Canbulut<sup>h</sup>, Jenna Drenten<sup>i</sup>, Anne Hamby<sup>j</sup>, Priyam Rangan<sup>k</sup>, Zhiyong Yang<sup>l</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Oklahoma State University, United States

<sup>b</sup> Baylor University, United States

<sup>c</sup> Lancaster University, United Kingdom

<sup>d</sup> University of Delaware, United States

<sup>e</sup> University of Wyoming, United States

<sup>f</sup> University of Lyon, France

<sup>g</sup> American University, United States

<sup>h</sup> Izmir University of Economics, Turkey

<sup>i</sup> University of Georgia, John Carroll University

<sup>j</sup> Virginia Tech, United States

<sup>k</sup> University of Kansas, United States

<sup>l</sup> University of Texas at Arlington, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Researchers of youth risk behavior frequently assume that behavior is volitional; the choice is to either engage in a risky behavior or a safe alternative. Yet, many factors may constrain life choices, not the least of which is how individuals view risk. The study here examines youth risk research to identify general knowledge gaps and shortcomings that may be limiting the positive impact of research-based efforts to promote youth well-being. The study proposes alternative approaches that address these gaps and shortcomings in particular with recognition of the social contexts of both risks and the programs designed to address those risks. A distinctive foundation for a participatory approach to understanding youth risk behavior is then developed.

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### 1. Introduction

Thousands of scholars and billions of dollars have been devoted to improving youth well-being by reducing the incidence of risky behaviors. Yet recent statistics suggest that much work remains. Nearly 20% of US eighth-graders and half of all high school students

have experimented with cigarettes (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2010); more than 1000 infants are born to 15–19 year-olds every day (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2010); and more than 6% of 12th graders report daily use of marijuana (Johnston et al., 2010). Rates of prescription drug abuse by youth (CADCA, 2008) and childhood obesity (Ogden et al., 2010) are on the rise. Although challenges vary from country to country, concerns about the adverse consequences of risky behaviors on youth well-being are shared around the globe.

Nearly all contributing behaviors to the leading causes of mortality and morbidity among youth could be categorized within several areas: tobacco use, alcohol and other drug use, sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), dietary behaviors, physical inactivity, and behaviors, including bullying, that result in injuries (CDC, 2011). Nearly all of these share two important characteristics. First, they are, at onset, volitional behaviors. Consequently, prevention and cessation programs have the potential to positively affect the choices that youth

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\* Corresponding author at: Oklahoma State University, 418A Business Building, Stillwater, OK 74074, United States. Tel.: +1 405 744 5109.

E-mail address: mmarily@okstate.edu (M.J. Mason).

make in these contexts. Second, the incidence of these risky behaviors has important societal consequences. For example, teen pregnancy alone is estimated to cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$9 billion each year (Hoffman, 2006), and smoking-related health costs exceed \$90 billion per year, much of which is paid by taxpayers through publically funded health programs (CDC, 2010). In combination, the potential to change youth's behaviors and to realize tremendous societal benefits from so doing provide a strong impetus for the critical examination of current perspectives on youth and their enactment of risky behaviors.

This article broadly examines prevailing perspectives on youth, targeted behaviors, and the drivers of harmful consumption behaviors. The central aims of this examination are: (1) to identify general knowledge gaps and shortcomings that may be limiting the positive impact of research-based efforts to promote youth well-being; (2) to propose alternative approaches that address these gaps and shortcomings; in particular (3) with recognition of the social contexts of both risks and the programs designed to address those risks. The article begins by defining youth and highlighting a few key differences between youth and adults. It then considers what constitutes risk in the context of youth behaviors from the dominant views in our literature, contrasted with the participatory approach studying and reducing risky behavior.

## 2. Prevailing views of youth and risk

Youth, recognized as the period between childhood and adulthood, is defined here as spanning ages 10 to 18, though stages in this range can vary greatly. The definition is based on adolescent development research, potential consumer vulnerabilities, and the regulation of risky behaviors (e.g., current federal funding for teen pregnancy prevention).

The onset and completion of puberty, during which the size and shape of the body changes rapidly, begins as early as 10 or 11 and can vary greatly (Cole, Mills, Jenkins, & Dale, 2005). In addition, sensation seeking and a willingness to engage in risky behavior in order to obtain perceived rewards appears to increase sharply from about ages 10 to 13, and remains high until about ages 16 to 18 after which it begins to decline (Martin et al., 2002; Steinberg et al., 2008). These trends are neurological and hormonal (Herdt & McClintock, 2000), with reward centers of the brain surging during puberty and then declining in adulthood while self-regulation systems develop slowly into adulthood (Durston et al., 2001; Pechmann, Levine, Loughlin, & Leslie, 2005). Therefore, the range from 10 to 18 seems likely to include the broadest set of biological changes that separate youth from children and adults.

When considering vulnerability toward risk behavior, Pechmann et al. (2005) reviewed the neuroscience, psychology and marketing literatures to determine youth vulnerabilities, settling on a narrower age range. Based on these literatures, the authors argued that three particular vulnerabilities exist for developing youth: 1) impulsivity, 2) self-consciousness and self-doubt, and 3) an elevated risk from product use for both alcohol and tobacco. Others (e.g., Cole et al., 2005) broaden the age definition because of earlier pubertal development and the need to protect youth from adverse consumption choices which can impact their health and life outcomes (Moses & Baldwin, 2005; Pechmann et al., 2011).

Youth is also marked by a significant psychosocial transformation and reorganization in their social life (Cole et al., 2005), spending more time with peers and socializing with a larger, more diversified cohort. Youth begin to question their sense of self, become increasingly concerned with others' evaluations, and strongly desire acceptance by both their close friends and larger cohort groups (Harter & Whitesell, 2003). From a psychosocial perspective, this shift toward peers is an important marker of maturity, as they experiment with their emerging independence and identity (Erikson, 1968).

Among peers, youth channel, select, and adjust behaviors and goals important to their developing sense of self (Nurimi, 2004). However, scholars and policymakers have concerns about the effect that increased peer influence during a time of self-doubt, accompanied by a distancing from adults and wanting social approval may have on adolescent involvement with risk behaviors. Further, the presence of peers amplifies the perceived benefits of risk taking (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005) as such risks are rewarded with social status among those peers. Taken together, these perspectives clearly distinguish youth from adults and children, highlighting youths' unique vulnerabilities for risk behaviors.

The political-legal view of youth risky behavior adopts a protective stance, regulating youth behavior and the environment (Andreasen, 2006; Mason et al., 2011). Age-based legal rights for consumption activities, such as purchasing alcohol, tobacco, firearms, and some forms of birth control, are one method to separate and protect youth. Age-defined promotion bans have been passed such as prohibiting advertising tobacco products toward teens, near schools, and in PG13 movies. Such age-based restrictions attempt to deter youth from exposure to premature adult consumption activities at a stage when the research suggest teens may be particularly drawn toward these activities (Andreasen, Goldberg, & Sirgy, 2012; Pechmann et al., 2011). Table 1 contrasts the political-legal view with other approaches to understanding and regulating youth risky behavior.

Other regulatory attempts include educating and persuading youth of the risk associated with target behaviors while attempting to reduce the attractive elements. It is precisely an education/persuasion focus that has limited the scope of research on youth risk behavior. As pointed out elsewhere (Mason et al., 2011), researchers, policy makers, and social reformers have taken a paternalistic view, the notion that some adult knows what is better for the youth than the youth. This view often results in limiting attention to one risky behavior at a time, presenting risk and mitigation in a manner reflecting the belief that volition is entirely free. One only has to present youth with the risks and appropriate choice; education will set them on the path to making the right choices. Yet, such strategy often targets only the movable middles, those youth in the middle of the risk distribution and with the greater likelihood of responding to social marketing (thus, movable), leaving teen groups with the greatest risk who hold vastly different motivations and meanings for risk engagement either ignored or marginalized. For example, youth who may not view any way to survive other than joining a gang due to structural factors such as where they live, the poor social conditions of their neighborhood, and so forth, may not be a relevant audience for a standard anti-bullying program. Considering the possibility that choices may be constrained in structural and social ways raises new questions about the contrast between youth and paternalistic views on risky behavior and vulnerability, as well as how such views might impact public policy and practice.

### 2.1. Youth risky behavior

Risky behaviors are behaviors that compromise health, quality of life, or life itself (Jessor, 1991). Much research has focused on consumption where potential adverse health outcomes are well-established, such as alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and unprotected sex. Recognizing a range of potential hazards, risk behavior is more broadly argued to be "any behavior that can compromise youth development—whether or not the youth is motivated by, or even aware of, the risk involved" (Jessor, 1991: p. 599).

Awareness of risk is an important element in the definition. On the one hand, using such a definition suggests that society has accurately identified objective hazards and simply has to educate youth on the risk, and then a safer decision will be made; this is the paternalistic

**Table 1**  
Prevailing views of youth and risk behavior.

	Biological perspective	Political–legal perspective	Socio-cultural and a participatory perspective
Focal concepts	Youth characterized by rapid hormonal, physiological, and somatic changes of puberty and interwoven with other social and psychological aspects of maturation including differences in how the social environment responds to the adolescent and different expectations for behavior (Irwin, Igra, Eyre, & Millstein, 1997)	Legal rights and restrictions (through taxes or promotion limits) relating to youth's access to harmful products are of central concern due to the positive relationship between access and consumption (McCarthy et al., 2009)	Risky consumption behaviors are part of socially embedded practice, enacted by individuals and groups as a response to, and as a way of negotiating and shaping, their structural contexts (Pilkington, 2007)
Key theories	Increased willingness to engage in risky behavior is neurological and hormonal (Steinberg, 2009)  Biological factors may also have indirect effects on risk taking, most clearly addressed in the area of hormonal changes (Cyranowski, Frank, Young, & Shear, 2000) and brain changes (Dahl, 2004)  The reward centers of the brain surge during puberty and then decline in adulthood, whereas the brain's cognitive control and self-regulation systems continue to develop slowly into adulthood (Steinberg, 2009)	The most fundamental law of economics: Increasing real and perceived costs decreases demand  Development assumed largely complete by the end of the teen years, so protections meant to overcome youth vulnerabilities (may become politically untenable)	Importance of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Within youth's social worlds, participating in risky consumption practices can be a source of cultural capital providing symbolic capital, status and social esteem  The project of the reflexive self. Identity development is characterized by status ambiguity and increasingly fragmented experiences (Côté, 1996). Emphasis on individual experiences, ideological cultural norms, and symbolic meanings associated with identity development
Risk	Sensation seeking and risky behavior in order to obtain perceived rewards, influenced by presence of peers, increase sharply from about age, 10 to, 13, and remains high until about ages, 16 to, 18 then begins to decline	Risk is a function of age, access and cost. Increases in risk by adding legal risks, and increases in costs will lead to decreases in demand	Participating in risky consumption practices can be a source of cultural capital providing symbolic capital, status and social esteem within fields of practice (i.e. their social worlds)
Vulnerability	Due to hormonal changes, puberty increases vulnerability to risk taking, as it leads to an increase in emotional and motivational tendency towards risk taking and sensation seeking, an increased appetite for emotional intensity, excitement and arousal	Vulnerability is something that youths will eventually grow out of. Adults can make optimal decisions for themselves	Vulnerability relates to youth quest for a social status within their peer group which makes adolescents vulnerable to the pressure exercised by the group members. The priority is to socialize oneself and play a role within their group by following its norms and codes even though this might be confusing for the individual in terms of consumption activities and risky practices
Unique insights	Timing of biological development affects risk, such that early-maturing teens are at greater risk for delinquency and are more likely than their peers to engage in antisocial behaviors, including drug and alcohol use, truancy, and precocious sexual activity	Structural aspects of the environment can have significant effects on youths consumption patterns	Understanding the cultural and sub-cultural capital that accompanies participation in risky consumption practices; More nuanced understanding of the pro-social benefits associated with these practices; Understanding of how young people manage these practices in the context of alternative practices.
Programming and legislation	Social marketing campaigns encourage sensation-seeking and risk-taking in healthy forms	Legislation establishes differential legal rights, restrictions, and regulations pertaining to youths versus adults	Policy confronts the ways that illicit consumption practices can accrue benefits for young people, and to consider ways of ensuring that harm reduction strategies are effective and appropriate. Requires finer-grained segmentation, youth empowerment, and recognition that risk is a function of lifestyle and identity experimentation and development, and is not one choice but many.
Research methods	The majority of biologically-oriented studies of adolescent risk are correlational, and use tools (such as fMRI scans) to examine how certain physical changes relate to behaviors. Other studies use experimental design and survey methods to gather data on adolescent risk behaviors and development	The majority of political-legal studies utilize field experiments wherein baseline measures of focal behaviors taken prior to the implementation of new laws and regulations are compared against subsequent measures or outcomes from matched treatment and control communities are compared	An ontological position of social-constructionism drives research in this context, and hence methods reflective of this approach are suitable, including: Participatory methods; Qualitative in-depth interviews; Observational methods; Case study; Life history; (Quasi)ethnographic approaches
Prototypical research	Steinberg (2009)	Chen and Forster (2006)	Goulding et al. (2009)

view (Mason et al., 2011). Examples include the current Teen Pregnancy Prevention funding within the Office of Adolescent Health for several dozen education programs, anti-bullying campaigns funded by the Department of Justice, and the Department of Education's Physical Education Program funding. If youth fail to choose pro-social behavior, failure is argued to be due to misunderstanding, underestimating risk, lack of neurocognitive control, lack of experience, or ignoring the danger (Steinberg, 2009).

Alternatively, one could argue that youth may be aware of and recognize risks attached to behavior, yet are making choices about how to act in a social context based on their perception and negotiation of the various risks associated with engaging or avoiding

'risky' consumption. What society may view as a risk may be viewed as a safer choice in the larger socio-cultural scheme. For example, pregnancy has been documented as a way young girls can escape gangs and the casual, often violent sex associated with simply living in proximity to gangs (Clemons, 2009), while boys engage in sex as a way to get into the gang (Lackey & Moberg, 1998). In other settings, youth is seen as an opportune time to have children because the public resources to support the mother are at their greatest (Tanner, 2011). This evidence suggests a participatory approach to understanding risk behavior is needed, building on existing socio-cultural research but distinct from a purely paternalistic approach in order to create solutions that work.

### 3. Toward a participatory approach

The participatory approach to understanding socio-cultural phenomenon was first developed as a mechanism to empower the poor and address structural inequalities (e.g., Friedmann, 1992). In serving as an empowerment strategy, the participatory approach was designed to address the shortcomings of a purely paternalistic approach to serving the needs of vulnerable populations (Fetterman, 2001). In short, the approach is characterized by understanding vulnerability from the viewpoint of the vulnerable, and engaging the vulnerable in empowering ways to define the issues and to develop solutions to the challenges they face (Bennett and Roberts, 2004), a view consistent with the transformative consumer research movement (e.g. Ozanne and Fischer, 2012). In the remainder of this manuscript, we review youth risk research from a socio-cultural perspective as this perspective is closest to participatory; socio-cultural research recognizes that youths' risky behaviors are part of socially embedded practice, enacted by individuals and groups as a response to and as a way of negotiating and shaping their structural contexts (Pilkington, 2007). This perspective places consumers in their field of practice (their social worlds) and attempts to deepen understanding of the wider social and cultural influences on their daily lives.

#### 3.1. Youth view of risky consumption practices

A participatory perspective of risky consumption highlights the tension between perceived risks and socially acceptable life experiences. The prevalent paternalistic view on risk is that engaging in risky behaviors is *always* riskier than not engaging in them, and yet many young people engage in these practices as part of their everyday lives in order to enjoy benefits (Plant & Plant, 1992). This central disparity in perceptions of risk and vulnerability is at issue, and arguably the closure of this gap is essential to the development of more youth-relevant approaches to policy around these behaviors.

Earlier, we mentioned some youth find getting pregnant to be safer than being a repeated victim. Similarly, recent research has identified other benefits, such as generating symbolic capital and social position within youth cliques by smoking (Quintero & Davis, 2002), symbolic or cultural capital (Haines, Poland and Johnson, 2009) being a form of social status recognized only within limited fields or settings (Bourdieu, 1984). Haines et al., (2009) provide empirical evidence for the differentiated meanings of tobacco use and how smoking frequency and intensity can vary according to personal and parental indicators of cultural capital. A central finding of this work was that for young people from relatively advantaged family contexts, smoking expresses social distinction and self-control. Being an occasional smoker enables their enactment of anti-establishment feelings while distancing themselves from the stigmatized identity categories of the regular or addicted smoker (Scheffels & Lund, 2005). Similarly, excessive alcohol consumption could be practiced as a way of demonstrating social distinction and social control for peer approval (e.g., Kolind, 2011). Likewise, Fletcher, Bonell, Sorhaindo, and Rhodes (2009) describe how marijuana use is an important aspect of some youth's lives, expressing street identity, leading to peer-group bonding, avoiding bullying, and other victimization.

Participatory research distinguishes between objective and perceived risk. Recent research shows that youth perception of risk is defined by the members of the group and should be recognized as it is by these others (Batat, 2011). The definition of vulnerability from the youth perspective is not universal among youth, but relative and may change from one group to another. Researchers (e.g., Roedder-John, 1999) have been studying the vulnerability of children and youth within different fields of consumption (e.g., alcohol or drugs) but do not provide precise definitions of risk from a youth perspective.

What are the factors and the actors related to young consumer vulnerability? In order to deepen understanding of risky consumption practices and vulnerability, it is important to consider contemporary perspectives on youth identity development and how young people manage the complexities of life.

#### 3.2. Contemporary perspectives of youth identity development

Because youth make daily decisions about which risks to approach and which to avoid in accordance with their ever-evolving self-concepts, risk-oriented decision making is just as much a matter of risk refusal as it is a matter of risk taking. The postmodernist view of youth suggests that identity development is characterized by status ambiguity and increasingly fragmented experiences (e.g., Bauman, 1998), primarily due to new technologies empowering young people to develop their individualized identity narratives (Côté & Allahar, 1994). Yet, uncertain identities can lead to risky consumption. For instance, Denscombe (2001) finds that young people use smoking to cope with the stress which their ambiguous identity creates.

The socio-cultural conceptions of identity development, in contrast to earlier discussed psychological approaches, emphasize individual experiences, ideological cultural norms, and symbolic meanings associated with identity development (e.g., Côté, 1996). Symbolic consumption practices are central to young people's lifestyles and provide meaning in the face of identity uncertainty (Miles, 2000). As such, the self is reconstituted as a function of the marketplace. From this perspective, risky consumptions behaviors (e.g., drug use, alcohol consumption) are socio-cultural bargaining tools used to navigate life passages (e.g., establish group membership, authenticate one's identity).

##### 3.2.1. The co-creation of risk

Co-creation theories are built upon the basic tenet of collaboration and mark a movement toward the co-production of value-added commodities (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Likewise, risk can be conceptualized as a co-created experience. The earlier examples regarding marijuana use as a form of generating cultural capital suggests a risk of losing capital if the risky behavior is avoided; thus, risk is co-created by the individual and the peer group, recognizing the influence of parents, schools and other institutions as well as the actual physical, emotional, or legal risk.

The perception of risk and interpretations of marketing messages are also subject to co-creation between youth and the organizations that aim to prevent risky behaviors. For instance, between 1998 and 2004, the U.S. Congress dedicated nearly \$1 billion for the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. Evaluations of campaign effectiveness in preventing drug use suggest some unintended consequences: the campaign actually encouraged some youth to begin using drugs, particularly marijuana (GAO Report, 2006; Hornik, Jacobsohn, Orwin, Piesse, & Kalton, 2008). Findings suggest that young people might interpret the ads to imply that marijuana use is more common among their peers and thus more socially acceptable. Perhaps had targeted youth been involved from the outset, a different campaign may have resulted in a more effective solution. At the very least, ads that addressed the target audience's social reality would have been more likely to be created, though ads may have been the wrong solution completely. Rather, a more comprehensive approach that recognized various socio-cultural factors may have led to a different strategy altogether, one that may have sought to influence a broad array of influences and influencers. We discuss some of the strategies later in the section on strategic implications.

##### 3.2.2. Risks as rites of passage

Youth is considered a liminal, "coming of age" period, in which individuals are wedged between two statuses, childhood and adulthood (Lesko, 1996). Rites of passage demonstrate to youths' peers, their families, and themselves that they are moving toward an



adult identity. Such rites offer one potentially fruitful area for participatory research because youth may seek to find or create their identity through socially instituted risky experiences, such as experimentation with drugs, alcohol, and sexual intercourse (e.g., Blumenkrantz, 1992; Quinn, Newfield & Protinsk, 1985). Objectively, these activities are risky; however, from a youth perspective, these activities may represent important rites for accepting or rejecting a potential identity. For instance, Demant and Østergaard (2007) suggest that youth partying is a rite of passage in which collective intoxication serves as a central method of social acceptance and in-group affirmation. Others suggest that first times are often meant to imitate adult behavior such as cigarette smoking, social drinking, or sexual activity (Delaney, 1995), rather than a separate youth-defined set of activity. Whichever is the case, these contrasting views highlight the need to understand how experiences are created and for what purpose, recognizing the co-morbidity of these behaviors (i.e., cigarette smoking, drinking, and sexual activity; Roberts & Tanner, 2002) but specifically for youth, understanding that these may be viewed as rites of accepting a particular social identity.

Further, the instance of co-morbidity suggests that for some youth, the issue is not a decision about a particular behavior but rather lifestyle, perhaps experimentally in the development of identity. Other decisions, such as peer selection (Leventhal and Keeshan, 2002), are also important, as are structural factors (such as habitation in gang turf) that constrain choice. While programmatically it may make sense to understand the micro-segments in which these rites of passage are developed, recognizing and understanding these other factors and decisions is also important when testing risk mitigation strategies.

### 3.2.3. Social factors influencing risky consumption

Youth's understanding of risk within the marketplace might be compounded by multiple factors including individual characteristics (youth self-concept), youth subculture norms (fears of exclusion and marginalization), experiential conditions (learning through experiencing different consumption fields), and contextual factors related to the digital context (social networks, virtual communities, etc.). Therefore, the participatory definition of youth vulnerability integrates a youth perception of vulnerable behavior within the marketplace. From the youth perspective, consumer vulnerability is neither related to individual characteristics (biophysical, psychological) and external conditions nor to the vulnerability experienced within the consumption context; it is in fact the youth quest for a social status within the peer group which makes a youth vulnerable to the pressure exercised by the group members. This pressure might lead to purchasing expensive items, surfing porn websites because it is cool, searching peer's approbation, trusting advice of virtual communities rather than their parents, and developing confidence in the use of digital and interactive equipment. For youth, the priority is to socialize him/herself and play a role within the group by following its norms and codes even though this might be confusing for the individual in terms of consumption activities and risky practices.

### 3.2.4. Key challenges for risk mitigation efforts and regulation

Many (and perhaps most) young people are engaging in what may be considered risky consumption behaviors and practices to negotiate risk in its varied forms throughout their everyday lives. One of our central arguments is the requirement to move away from a single risk factor analysis approach to understanding these behaviors as occurring within a lifestyle and, instead, to aim to develop a more contextualized understanding of youth lives, focusing on understanding the social meanings attached to consumption practices.

From a sociological perspective, the focus shifts to understanding the (sub)cultural capital accruing from participation in risky consumption, which can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the pro-social benefits associated with these practices. Simultaneously, it

develops understanding of how young people manage these practices in the context of alternatives (e.g. hookah smoking being perceived as a socially desirable and hip way to form social connections, while cigarette smoking is a source of disdain and to be avoided, (Griffiths, Harmon, & Gilly, 2011)). Recognizing that these behaviors are part of socially embedded practice enacted by individuals and groups as a response to, and as a way of, negotiating and shaping their structural contexts, a key aspect is helping young people to manage life in the least harmful way. Policy should confront the ways that illicit consumption practices can accrue benefits for young people. One challenge may be to approach risky consumption practices from the perspective of risk reduction (or management of pleasure) rather than eradication of illicit consumption practices (Goulding, Shankar, Elliot, & Cannford, 2009), such as the promotion of condoms and contraceptives to the sexually active; while not providing complete protection against STIs or pregnancy, these do significantly reduce the risks associated with sexual activity. Recognizing, too, that rites of passage are a natural part of development, substituting risky for positive rites of passage provide young people with a positive self-concept and make them less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors (e.g., Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993). Yet without a participatory approach, such attempts might be an anathema to youth, much in the same way that other risk avoidance and risk reduction strategies simply do not fit their world view.

This discussion of recognizing the youth view and the contrast with the paternalistic view supports a perspective that the real value is not in either/or, but rather a both/and approach. Co-creating positive rites, for example, resolves the need to mitigate risk while at the same time recognizing the need for youth to mark critical stages of growth.

Co-creation, or youth participation beginning with research and involving youth through the process of program design, evaluation, and adaptation, can result in many benefits (Checkoway, Dobbie, & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Specifically, research has highlighted benefits such as greater likelihood of reaching the target audience and the targeted behaviors while empowering youth, thereby removing constraints to positive choice (Sabo Flores, 2008). Further, greater self-accountability, or holding one's self responsible for the right choice, is likely to accrue and is far more sustainable than compliance (e.g., Patton, 2011).

## 4. Discussion

Research has contributed greatly to understanding the nature of risk and how individuals respond to threats. Youth, though, pose a difficult set of challenges to those who seek to improve the quality of life by reducing risky behavior. From their less-developed cognitive ability to the complex social system of benefits in which they operate, youth require specialized care and attention.

In this paper, we have argued for a participatory approach to understanding and influencing youth vulnerability. This approach begins with recognition that risky behavior is often not an outcome of a single choice, but a series that can be construed as identity-making and lifestyle experimentation. Studies that take a positive youth development approach without regard or focus on a specific risk or risky behavior (Catalano, Haggert, Oesterle, Flemin, & Hawkins, 2004) are few but increasing (e.g., Lerner et al., 2005; Pittman, 2012). This broader approach, labeled by some as the cumulative impact approach (Pittman, 2012), aims to strengthen social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and moral competencies and self-efficacy, increasing healthy bonding with adults, peers, and younger children. Exemplified by *Ready at 21* programs across the US, the positive youth development movement aims to shift from a single problem focus to a focus on factors that broadly affect positive and problem youth development. This development in the field of youth risk is transformative as it seeks to understand and shape the broader

world of youth, consistent with our perspective that a single risk focus limits the probability of a successful program.

A participatory view is supported by a review of the many approaches to mitigating youth risk which indicates that social or community-based health programs tend to be the most effective (Lantz, Jacobson, Warner, Wasserman, & Larson, 2000). These cumulative impacts are observed due to elimination of structural constraints of choice, reconstruction across the community of what acceptable behaviors (and rites of passage) are, and integration of the broader array of risk factors. These results have been observed in a variety of domain-specific meta analyses; in Franklin and Corcoran's (2000) review of studies relating to youth pregnancy, community-based programs resulted in increased contraceptive use and decreased pregnancy rates over school-based programs, although both resulted in significant positive effects. Bruvold and Rundall's (1988) meta-analysis of alcohol-use deterrent programs indicate that interventions relying upon social reinforcement, social norms, and developmental behavioral models are more effective than traditional "awareness" programs designed to inform youth about alcohol's health risks. Lantz et al.'s (2000) meta-analysis of youth-focused smoking control programs indicates that the effectiveness of school based programs appears to be enhanced when they are included in broad-based community efforts in which parents, mass media, and community organizations are involved, and in which the social environment as well as individual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors are targeted for change. This targeting of the social environment is also consistent with a socio-cultural and youth-participant view.

In this paper, we have explored a number of avenues for future work that offer great promise in understanding the nature of youth risk behavior and consumption. In particular, adopting participatory research and programming should enable greater understanding of the trade-offs youth make when negotiating the challenges of their social system and increase the probability of programming success (Sabo Flores, 2008). We have argued that such a perspective may increase understanding of perceptions of vulnerability, risk, and the decision processes resulting in risk behavior, particularly at both ends of the risk spectrum (i.e., very high or very low risk).

At the practical level, programs should consider eliminating barriers to choice; those social factors that make risk-reduction impossible to carry out. These are not matters of self-efficacy as identified in threat-protection models (e.g., Tanner, Hunt, & Eppright, 1991) but are structural factors in the social-cultural experience that inhibit choice. For example, one could argue that a lack of condom availability is a form of a barrier that inhibits choice but the type of barrier we are also suggesting includes such factors as social norms regarding (lack of) condom use.

One could argue that we are suggesting only message framing; that framing condom use, for example, as a socially-acceptable and responsible action is simply reframing a message. Yet, the challenge is not to simply influence the youth, but also the rest of the community in which that teen lives. What is the reaction of a druggist or convenience store clerk when a youth attempts to purchase a condom? How available are condoms? These and other questions can lead to significant barriers from the youth's perspective.

Further, while a large body of work on self-identity exists that documents youth vulnerability to products (e.g., Cohen, 2000), we argue the need to understand the broader juncture of structural influences on rites of passage, risk behavior, and self-identity construction. Rites of passage may be a necessary social construction for developing self-awareness and identity, thereby making the creation of rites that enhance one's wellbeing a potentially fruitful area for further work particularly when understanding the impact of structural constraints and the interplay of lifestyle/identity decisions.

The participatory approach also involves co-creation in the design and evaluation of programming with greater attention paid to segmentation. Co-creation is more likely to lead to success because

by gaining a youth perspective, the program is more likely to hit its target, can be empowered to use data to adapt based on research and evaluation, and improves the capacity to respond (Sabo Flores, 2008). Further, a paternalistic approach disempowers youth, which is likely to lead to negative consequences (Checkoway et al., 2003), and far too often addresses only the movable middles.

This is more than an issue of how to measure risk and choice opportunity. The participatory perspective should yield insight into understanding, for example, the interaction of settings and choice that either free or constrain choice, as well as identify risk perceptions. We identified research regarding residency in gang-controlled areas and the impact on sexual risk taking, but other factors of setting, such as the easy availability of weapons, may influence risk behavior much in the same way that cafeteria design influences food choice (Sobal & Wansink, 2007). Future research should carefully examine the relationship between risk, settings, and perceptions regarding freedom of choice.

The importance of empowerment, though, also reprises our theme that youth may perceive their choices constrained in ways that are not readily apparent to policy makers and other authorities. Arguably, the highest form of accountability is self-accountability, which is encouraged through the participatory approach (Patton, 2011).

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