

Pathways to Constructive Adolescent Behavior: Insights from China and the United States

EARA 2018 Keynote

Eva M. Pomerantz
Department of Psychology
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



Adolescence is often characterized by mild “storm and stress” in the West, such that youth are prone to not only mood disruption, but also unconstructive behavior (e.g., risk taking). However, this is not necessarily the case in other regions of the world. Moreover, even in the West, the teen years can be a time of particularly constructive behavior for some youth. In an effort to understand how to foster positive psychological adjustment, my collaborators and I have looked to China to understand if youth navigate the early adolescent years differently than do their American counterparts. Most recently, we have been concerned with the mechanisms that undergird the distinct pathways in the two countries during this phase of development. The research I will present focuses on the idea that how youth navigate the teen years is shaped in part by their *conceptions of adolescence* (i.e., stereotypes of teens), which often reflect cultural constructions of this phase.

The first set of studies I will discuss indicates that Chinese (vs. American) youth's behavior (e.g., engagement in school) is often more constructive over early adolescence. The second set of studies suggests that one reason for the difference is that culture influences youth's conceptions of adolescence, such that Chinese (vs. American) culture leads youth to see this phase less as a time of “storm and stress”. The third set of studies explores the role of youth's views of teens in their development in more depth, with attention to whether helping youth to see the teen years as a time of responsibility leads to more constructive behavior. I will end with a discussion of how interventions to change youth's conceptions of adolescence have the potential to not only foster more constructive behavior among the recipients of such interventions, but also change cultural constructions, thereby creating normative flourishing during adolescence.