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Introduction

When delivered in a safe space, programs effective in promoting positive youth development (PYD) involve key features termed the "Big Three": 1) positive and sustained adult-youth relationships; 2) life-skill-building activities; and 3) opportunities for youth contribution and leadership (e.g., Lerner, 2004; Tirrell et al., 2020). Safety is recognized to be a key component of, and a contextual prerequisite for, effective program delivery (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson & Walker, 2010; Lerner, 2004; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). However, what comprises "safety" and how "safety" functions within program contexts is not fully understood. This gap in the literature is especially true for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), such as El Salvador and, specifically, within community-based programs in LMICs (Catalano et al., 2004).

PYD is framed by relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory, which describes development as occurring through mutually influential relations between person and context (or *person ⇔ context relations*) (Lerner et al., 2015; Overton, 2015). One major instance of an RDS-based theory of development has been presented by Spencer (2007; Spencer et al., 2015), that is, the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). Spencer explains that youth perceptions of their context moderate PYD. When the PVEST model is applied to youth programs aimed at promoting PYD, then the model would lead to the idea that the phenomenological experiences of

youth regarding program safety may influence the outcomes of program participation. Indeed, the PVEST model would specify that the perceptions of youth would be orthogonal to (i.e., independent of) program curricula or *objective* facets of safety (e.g., physical, psychological, relational, or spiritual). However, little is known about the specific features of programs that youth perceive as contributing to a sense of safety. Accordingly, predicated on the importance of youth phenomenology for individuals marginalized by such circumstances as poverty (Spencer et al., 2015), we sought to study youth perceptions of safety in PYD programs offered by the international sponsorship organization Compassion International (CI), to socioeconomically poor Salvadoran youth.

Perceptions of program safety for youth might include such features as physical safety, psychological safety, and social-relational safety. A holistic sense of safety, or one that inclusively encompasses and integrates features of, and relations with, the ecology in which youth develop, could be engendered through programmatic designs that attend to the dynamic relations among physical, psychological, and social-relational safety. Having a better understanding of the phenomenology of safety among program participants, and how such perceptions function in youth programs would enable PYD program practitioners to better align their conceptions — that is, their "objective" definitions — of program safety with the phenomenological experiences of youth and, in so doing, better promote PYD and thriving outcomes.

The present study was informed by preliminary quantitative findings emerging from the broader CI Study of PYD (see Lerner et al., 2019; Tirrell et al., 2021; Tirrell, Gansert, et al., 2019; Tirrell, Geldhof, et al., 2019). As described in this article, youth who engaged in CI-supported programs reported feeling safe at the CI programs, but also reported feeling generally unsafe, and worrying about their safety, in the broader contexts of their lives (e.g., their travel between program sites and their homes; the general sense of danger within their specific neighborhoods). This marked difference—that youth consistently felt unsafe in their communities yet felt safe while at the CI programs—informed our present, PVEST-based research question: What makes youth feel safe in a community-based program and what about safety is important to them? To explore this question, we first describe CI and the El Salvador context, then review literature pertinent to physical, psychological, and social-relational safety that informed the framing of the present study. We then present and rationalize a hypothesis that, for faith-based youth development programs, spiritual safety (e.g., when youth feel they have a relationship with God) may be an important component of youth phenomenological psychological and social-relational safety.

Compassion International and the El Salvador Context

Compassion International (CI) is a faith-based child-sponsorship organization that, at this writing, collaborates with churches in 26 LMICs in the majority world to provide community-based programs to more than 2.2 million children and adolescents. The C I approach to youth programming is philosophically aligned to the Lerner and Lerner (2019; Lerner et al., 2015) model of PYD with the overall goal of alleviating child poverty and promoting youth thriving. To accomplish this, CI collaborates with local communities in order to integrate their youth programming and resources into the fabric of the community. As well, CI emphasizes the importance of religious faith as an asset in the lives of youth (see Sim & Peters, 2014; Tirrell, Geldhof, et al., 2019). CI has operated in El Salvador since 1977 and has served over 67,000 children through collaborations with more than 290 local church communities.

At the time of this study (2018), El Salvador was reported to be one of the most violent countries on Earth, with a homicide rate far higher than that of its neighboring countries (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Published rates of homicide and other crimes in El Salvador may, in fact, be underestimations as many inhabitants do not report when they have been the victims of crime. Indeed, given that crimes like extortion (e.g., a "toll" for entering a specific district controlled by a specific gang) happen on a daily basis, many Salvadorans simply view crime as the cost of doing business or the cost of living (Andrade, 2015; Huhn et al., 2007). In this context, exploring how facets of safety function in conjunction with youth development programs may allow program leaders to provide and develop spaces and places that better promote PYD and youth thriving.

In a nationally representative survey of Salvadorans, also conducted at the time of the present study, 54.8% of respondents indicated that delinquency and insecurity were the top problems in the country (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, 2018). In addition, youth and young adults constituted the largest proportions of local gang membership at that time (Wolf, 2017). Given that CI programs operate within the same communities as these gang, CI addresses the issue by offering skill development workshops to youth as an alternative to joining the local

gangs. These workshops afford youth opportunities to develop employment-related skills sufficient to provide potential employment and income generation for themselves and their families.

Within El Salvador, the presence of gangs, drugs, and community violence diminishes effectiveness of any familial or community-based safety net that youth may rely on for protection. Gang violence impacts how parents raise their children as well as how youth grow and develop within neighborhoods afflicted by chronic violence (Johnco et al., 2020; Rojas-Flores et al., 2013). The goal of youth development organizations such as CI is to promote PYD, which, as noted in relation to the Big Three (e.g., Lerner, 2004; Tirrell et al., 2020), first requires having safe spaces to operate PYD programs. CI recognizes the barriers to safety that exist within the Salvadoran context, and their program design employs a holistic approach that includes physical safety as well as psychological and social-relational (i.e., interpersonal) safety that is supportive of youth development. Faith-based organizations, such as CI, also foster positive bonds with God that enhance the other components of their programming (Tirrell, Geldhof, et al., 2019).

The Importance of Program Safety

There is evidence that the provision of safety is in fact a necessary contextual condition for youth programming to be successful in promoting PYD (Lerner, 2004; Lerner et al., 2015). The provision of physical, psychological, and social-relational safety are key components of PYD among children and adolescents (e.g., Blum, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Vandell et al., 2015). As such, we will review existing literature on the importance of youth program safety, as studied to date in the youth development literature. We will then note the absence of systematic investigation of youth perceptions of safety. This absence emphasizes the need to explore the distinction between youth phenomenological experiences (i.e., perceptions) of program safety and the alignment, or lack thereof, between researcher- or practitioner-specified approaches to (i.e., definitions of) safety and the perceptions of youth program participants.

In a review of successful community programming for youth development, Eccles and Gootman (2002) found that physical and psychological safety were ecological conditions needed for successful programming. They defined these safe spaces as settings wherein there was an absence among youth program participants of "fear" or a "feeling of insecurity" (p. 9). Similarly, Gambone and Connell (2004) specified physical and emotional safety as essential components of a community action framework for youth development. In addition, Lerner and Lerner (2019) and Tirrell et al. (2020) argued that youth programs must take place in safe environments if the Big Three curricula used to promote PYD are to be effective. As well, Larson and Walker (2010) urged practitioners to examine how youth program leaders can provide specific experiences that create safe spaces that afford effective programming.

In turn, youth in contexts lacking safety have lower self-efficacy, more externalizing problems, and are more prone to violent acts, among other problematic outcomes (Leventhal et al., 2015). Contextual violence within communities, such as those found within the Salvadoran context of this study, also has a negative effect on the mental health of youth, an effect that is further compounded by caregivers if they also have mental health problems (Cuartas & Leventhal, 2020; see also Rojas-Flores et al., 2013). Considering the context within which CI operates, offering a space where youth have opportunities to simply be children and adolescents in spite of their environment is critical for their development (Langager & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2015). The CI space not only fosters their development, it also cultivates a sense of connection and belonging, thus motivating youth to maintain their participation in the CI program.

PYD programming may also be able to counter the negative effects of contextual violence. Onyeka et al. (2022) examined youth participants in a PYD-based peer-mentoring program located in a U.S. community with high levels of contextual violence. Within this context, they found that the Five Cs model of PYD (Lerner et al., 2015; Lerner & Lerner, 2019) was useful for predicting features of youth thriving, demonstrating that youth with high levels of competence were less likely to engage in behaviors that conflicted with law enforcement. They also saw that caring, connection, and contribution, together, predicted fewer mental health symptoms (i.e., anxiety and depression) across time (Onyeka et al., 2022). Given such findings about the links between PYD and programs that provide safe settings and/or youth perceptions of safety in programs, it is useful to discuss the literature that focuses on the specific facets of safety that may be linked to PYD.

Physical Safety

In both reviews and empirical studies of youth development (e.g., Anderson et al., 2018; Bialeschki et al., 2007; Fauth et al., 2007; Halpern et al., 2000; Larson & Walker, 2010; Rojas-Flores et al., 2013; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Tirrell et al., 2020), physical safety has been identified as a key contextual condition enabling PYD programming to be enacted and therefore to increase the chances of enhancing youth thriving. However, many studies have not been sufficiently precise about the meaning of physical safety. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) noted that a program must elicit a "sense of safety," without elucidating the specific program components that constitute safety. Similarly, Bialeschki et al. (2007) explored how summer camps foster PYD and emphasized that safety is a key omponent, without explaining how the summer camp experience is safe for youth.

Greater specificity with regard to safety considerations can be found in research on school climate. The U.S. National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments defines safe environments to be those without violence, bullying, harassment, and controlled-substance use (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, n.d.). To explore qualities of after-school programs, researchers have also probed into the perspectives of young individuals regarding their sense of security. Strobel et al. (2008) conducted interviews with youth participants in after-school programs within low-income contexts of the U.S. to understand the qualities of these programs that attracted them to enroll and participate. The findings indicated that youth felt a tangible sense of physical security within the program, largely attributable to the substantial presence of staff members on-site. Furthermore, these staff members came from similar backgrounds and could assist youth in navigating the unique challenges of their low-income context. While it is accepted that physical safety is a prerequisite for successful youth programming, the mechanisms through which LMIC programs establish safety and how participants perceive that security has been underexplored.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety may be another component of a young person's sense of safety that is relevant to the youth program context. YouthPower Learning (2017)—an initiative of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—described a psychologically safe environment as one where "youth feel free to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings" (p. 14). In a meta-analysis of PYD program evaluations within LMICs, Catalano et al. (2019) included psychological safety as part of an "enabling environment" for PYD. Specifically, they described an "enabling environment" as one where youth feel safe within an immediate context free from violence, conflict, and crime. This environmental definition posits physical safety as a necessary prerequisite for psychological safety, emphasizing the importance of youth being able to explore ideas, thoughts, and feelings while feeling physically safe in their program (Catalano et al., 2019). Psychological safety, due to its encompassing nature, is influenced by the social-relational climate of the youth context and, for faith-based programs, is likely impacted by spiritual safety.

Social-Relational Safety

Indeed, it is difficult for youth to feel psychologically safe—for instance, to explore their identity and/or to express, reform, and re-express ideas—if physical safety is lacking. Similarly, a lack of social or relational safety might also limit feelings of psychological safety with youth. Research shows that regardless of context, sustained relationships with caring adults are important assets to promote thriving within the lives of youth (Bowers et al., 2015). Deutsch and Jones (2008) found that the social-relational climate of a youth program influenced youth actions and their sense of security or safety. Youth revealed that their feelings of comfort within the program increased when leaders and youth concentrated on the relational climate between them, thus engendering mutual respect between youth and adult mentors. For these youth, being "respected" was a bidirectional relationship where adults "gotta give respect to receive it" (Deutsch & Jones, 2008, p. 682). Such bidirectional respect and adult-youth relationships fosters sustained "developmental relationships" (Li & Julian, 2012), which further enhance psychological safety by supporting youth with creative freedom and agency to improve their surroundings (e.g., see Larson & Walker, 2010). In addition, a shared identity or shared background between program participants and program staff, like that of local CI staff and youth participants, might foster a sense of belonging and connection that facilitates greater social-relational safety (Colistra et al., 2019).

Spiritual Safety

In the present study, we investigated whether spiritual safety is also a relevant component of holistic PYD programs, perhaps especially in faith-based programs, such as those of CI. Given the limited research conducted on faith-based youth programs, it is important to define spirituality as opposed to religion. Spirituality is often viewed as a personal search for a connection to the transcendent, which may or may not take place within an organized religion with pecific structures, rules, and membership guidelines (King & Boyatzis, 2015). While youth within the CI program likely view these constructs as intimately intertwined due to the overtly religious nature of the program, we focus specifically on spirituality as it is the more inclusive construct. Thus, spiritual safety encompasses elements of a program that engender feelings of safety for youth that emerge from their spirituality.

In youth development research, spirituality has been identified as a developmental asset in the lives of youth (Hay et al., in press) and as a protective factor correlated with increased character, grit, sense of purpose, prosociality, and subjective well-being (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Barton & Miller, 2015; James et al., 2012; King & Furrow, 2004; Kor et al., 2019). Similarly, religion and spirituality have been found to improve self-regulation and self-control, which in turn decreased problem behaviors such as substance abuse (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). All of the above qualities point toward thriving in youth development. King et al. (2023) succinctly stated, "to thrive is to develop and adapt in authentic, mutually beneficial relationships that nurture one's contextually adaptive values, purpose, and contributions" (p. 429). Within faith-based programs such as CI, spiritualty and a connection to God (however conceptualized) plays a central role in facilitating youth thriving and may be linked to feelings of safety that youth might experience within their day-to-day lives (King et al., 2020).

In exploring how this spiritual connection with God functions psychologically, Wood et al. (2010) found that a positive relationship with God (in the absence of avoidance and anxiety with respect to God) could constitute a secure attachment with God. Underlying this connection between safety and a personal relationship with God was the belief that the perceived bidirectional relationship between the youth and God may offer a psychological secure base for youth to return to in times of stress or worry. Within a high-stress, high-worry context such as El Salvador, the benefits of a secure base for youth may be even more salient. Furthermore, given the transcendent nature of God, we would also expect the benefits of spiritual safety to extend beyond the walls of the program site as youth continue to engage with God outside of CI.

Although many attachment theorists have articulated the benefits of a secure base, Kirkpatrick (2005) extends this concept to cover the positive mental health benefits of God-as-a-secure-base, noting positive correlations with internal locus of control, personal competence, hopeful future expectations, and a negative relation with a fear of death (see also James & Fine, 2015; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Cherniak et al. (2021) also noted that a secure attachment relationship with God may be protective by providing avenues for more experiences of transcendence, greater resilience, and lower levels of stress. The bidirectional relationship the youth perceives with God, where God has agency and engages with the youth, may also allow the youth to view God as an additional "caring adult" within the context of the CI program. The psychological benefits of such an attachment with God further reinforces the above-noted components of psychological safety and social-relational safety and may provide faith-based youth development programs an additional avenue to foster PYD by increasing the safety of youth in their programs.

Taken together, the literature examining physical, psychological, and social-relational dimensions of safety within youth development programs suggests that practitioners need to attend to all aspects of youth safety (i.e., holistic safety; see Table 1). As such, for practitioners in faith-based settings, attention to such holism may mean that attention to spiritual dimensions of safety will add additional benefits for the positive development of youth participants. Nevertheless, in all the literature we have reviewed, the PVEST-based distinction (Spencer, 2007) between phenomenologically-based experiences and practitioner defined and provided instances of safely have not been addressed. At a minimum, then, studying youth perceptions of safety can contribute valuable insights for measurement that could add to the variance accounted for in program effects on PYD. At best, however, assessment of youth perceptions of safety in the programs in which they participate could be an impetus to revise program designs to accommodate the phenomenology of youth. Thus, to better understand youth experiences of safety and whether and how holistic safety might be supported and fostered in PYD programs, it is important for researchers to incorporate youth perceptions and experiences with these dimensions of safety.

The Current Study

Using the faith-based PYD programs of CI as a sample case, we sought to contribute to identifying potential dimensions of youth-perceived program safety and, as such, whether there was use in differentiating between youth phenomenological experiences of program safety and the provision of dimensions of safety specified by researchers and practitioners. Therefore, we examined the perceptions of CI-supported youth about whether their experiences in their CI programs provided them with a sense of safety and, if so, in what ways—physically, psychologically, social-relationally, and spiritually. Although youth program leaders in El Salvador cannot rid their neighborhoods of gangs or associated gang violence, they can manage the space within which the program operates. Therefore, developing and maintaining an atmosphere that provides physical security may offer youth phenomenological experiences of psychological and social-relational safely. In addition, because faith-based programs centrally involve the fostering of a personal relationship with God, the special case of spiritual safety may be of particular importance for promoting PYD among youth in faith-based programs. In sum, the present research sought to ascertain whether a perceived sense of safety existed among youth participating in rural and urban instantiations of CI programs in El Salvador and, if so, to understand the components of youth perceptions of safety. Exploring how components of safety are phenomenologically experienced by youth may allow program leaders to create more effective program spaces and programming for promoting PYD (Spencer et al., 2015).

Method

The overall CI Study of PYD involves survey assessments of over 1,200 youth, half of whom participated in CI programs. As noted above, when questioned about their perceptions of safety in the community, more than three-quarters of the youth indicated they were worried about personal safety; however, more than 90% reported feeling safe when in their CI program. This assessment of safety in the larger CI-supported sample did not afford examination of what youth considered safe about program participation. Fortunately, however, a small set of CI-supported youth were nominated by the CI practitioners as representing thriving exemplars in their program, and qualitative interviews with these youth included questions about what is meant by safety and how spiritual safety might play a role in faith-based youth programs. Given the observed difference in the perception of safety in the quantitative data, the qualitative data from thriving exemplars represent a unique opportunity to learn more about youth perceptions of safety in El Salvador (see Bryman, 2006).

Participants

There were 18 CI-supported youth (50% female) identified as thriving and spiritual exemplars. Exemplars were nominated by local CI staff based on responses to 18 Likert-scale items (e.g., pursues something they are passionate about, really interested in, and/or naturally gifted in) and six short-answer questions regarding their observations of thriving behaviors and attitudes and spiritual exemplarity (e.g., How is their faith evident in their life more than other youth their age?; King et al., 2017; Lerner et al., 2005; for complete details on the selection process, see Vaughn et al., 2022). The selected youth were viewed as having characteristics that represent the goals of CI for thriving. Ages ranged from 14 years to 19 years ($Mage$=16.39, SD=1.83). All reported some family religious affiliations including Protestant/Evangelical (78%) and Catholic (22%). To reduce the risk of participant or project-site fatigue of participation in the broader CI Study of PYD, these CI-supported youth were selected from sites not included in the quantitative data collection.

Interview Protocol

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed as part of the broader I Study of PYD to elicit youth comments about various topics such as identity, thriving, spirituality, future orientation, purpose in life, PYD, and their experiences within the CI program (see Vaughn et al., 2022). Questions pertaining specifically to physical safety focused on their sense of personal safety in general as well as their sense of safety within the CI program. The interview protocol included questions such as, "Does being registered in Compassion impact your

feelings of being safe? If so, how?" and "What or who makes you feel safe and protected?" Youth were also asked to talk about how it felt to be loved by God and whether their faith in God had helped them overcome some adversity. Additionally, the interviewers probed the participants to better understand the individuals or community within CI that encouraged their faith formation.

The protocol was initially developed in English before being translated into Spanish by native Spanish speakers. It was then back-translated from Spanish into English to ensure cross-lingual accuracy (Brislin, 1970). This translation was reviewed and modified by local interpreters and CI staff in El Salvador to ensure the language used was appropriate for the Salvadoran context.

Procedure

The CI staff in El Salvador selected three CI project sites located in different regions from which to interview youth identified as thriving exemplars. In June 2018, three researchers from the U.S. conducted the interviews with the assistance of local interpreters. One researcher was fluent in Spanish and conducted interviews in Spanish with the interpreter clarifying as needed. The other two researchers did not speak Spanish and interviewed the exemplars with their interpreter. Each researcher interviewed two exemplars from each site with the average interview lasting 85 minutes. Audio from the interviews was recorded and transcribed verbatim by bilingual members of the U.S. research team or an independently contracted transcription service. Bilingual members of the research team translated the interviews into English using a side-by-side method adapted from Clark et al. (2017). The transcript was cross-checked for accuracy in two rounds.

Data Analysis

The present study was informed by initial coding of these transcripts done for the broader CI Study of PYD, which used a deductive coding process for constructs related to PYD, spirituality, hope, and thriving (see Vaughn et al., 2022). We followed an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Miles et al., 2014). A team of coders was trained on all codes using a "golden transcript," that is, a transcript that the coding team coded together to reach agreement on all coding criteria using an iterative process of discussing and reconciling differences in coding to hone the code definitions and criteria. This iterative process was repeated for two more transcripts to establish interrater agreement (Campbell et al., 2013). The coding team then continued to code the 18 total interviews working in pairs and routinely meeting as a group to maintain interrater agreement. NVivo version 12 was used to manage the coding process. It is important to highlight that none of the coders identified as Salvadoran. Mindful of this limitation, we consulted with CI staff at various stages of analysis to ensure ccurate interpretation of the data.

For the present study both an inductive and deductive thematic approach was used to understand perceptions of safety (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This two-part methodology was useful in that it used theoretically-informed categories to construct the interview protocol for the initial deductive phase of analysis. Then, categories sensitive to the particular context of the research and beyond those initially established were identified for analysis (i.e., inductive phase; Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the initial deductive coding phase two codes related to safety emerged: "Safe and Protected" and "Caring Relationships within CI." To further explore youth perceptions of safety, we inductively analyzed the "Safe and Protected" coded segments. Through this process, we used three guiding themes (i.e., sensitizing concepts; Bowen, 2006): physical safety, psychological safety, and perceptions of safety connected to faith. The "Caring Relationships within CI" code provided data relevant to social-relational safety. All relevant codes and definitions are included in Table 2.

Results

All 18 exemplars discussed their ideas about safety, with 16 mentioning safety within the CI project site specifically, 14 discussing feeling safe with the project staff, and 12 discussing the impact their spiritual lives had on their perceived safety. We present results from these discussions of safety according to the three categories of holistic safety discussed in the introduction: physical, psychological, and social/relational. We also present results that reveal how spirituality influenced the participants' sense of safety. All names presented are pseudonyms.

Physical Safety

Physical safety, both within and outside of the CI project, was clearly described by the exemplars. The youth gave tangible examples of how physical safety manifested within the project sites. All but one exemplar made explicit reference to their physical safety, either within the CI project site or within their homes and neighborhoods.

A recurring theme in regard to physical safety was that of the *physical door* to the project site. One exemplar, Alejandra, age 14, said, "Yo siento que de la puerta para adentro nosotros estamos protegidos, porque ya entrando aquí ellas no nos dejan salir, hasta la hora de salida . . ." ["I feel like from the door inside we are protected, because entering here they do not let us leave, until it is time to leave . . ."]. Alejandra further noted that the sense of safety extended beyond the door as project staff would call her mother to ensure she made it home after leaving the program site. Emiliano, age 16, also recognized how the project staff purposefully kept children inside the project site until it was their time to leave, "Siempre están atentos a la seguridad de todos los niños y no dejan que ningún niño se aleje del grupo. . . . Siempre mantienen la puerta cerrada" ["They are always attentive and they do not let any child leave the group. . . . They always keep the door closed"]. And Florencia, age 14, stated, "No me puedo salir porque nos tienen cuidado y la puerta está cerrada" ["I cannot leave because they are taking care of us and the door is closed"]. The project staff maintained physical safety by keeping the children within the walls of the program site, demonstrating the interplay between physical and social-relational senses of safety. In essence, the physical door used to enter the CI program acted as a clearly delineated boundary between the unsafe context of their lives outside the program and the safety they knew existed inside the program.

Building on this sense of physical safety, David, age 14, explained how he knew the project site was safe:

> Yo diría que es seguro. El señor que anda allí, él es el que anda todos los días en la puerta y está pendiente en todo. Está abriendo las puertas cuando estamos en el culto; cuando estamos orando, él está pendiente aquí porque esa puerta queda abierta . . . porque en esta comunidad, en esta colonia donde vivimos hay delincuencia. Y a veces se hacen pasar por jóvenes. Por eso, en el [sitio del proyecto] siempre ponen a un tutor en la puerta y les han dicho también que si van a venir a dejar a los niños que vengan las mamas porque así ya no sé mete nadie. Para mí eso es seguridad, está bueno.
>
> [I would say it is safe. The gentleman who is over there, he is the one who is at the door every day and is attentive to everything. He is opening the doors when we are in worship; when we are praying, he is looking out here because that door stays open . . . because in this community, in this neighborhood where we live there is delinquency. And sometimes they pretend to be young people. For this reason, in the project they always put a tutor at the door and they have also told them that if they are coming to drop off the children, it's the mothers who should come, because that way no one else would get in. For me that's security, it's good.]

David's response suggests the importance of monitoring the door and ensuring the physical safety of the program site. "Delinquency" here is understood to be crime often perpetrated by young people in the neighborhood who might pretend to be program participants in order to gain access to the project site. Ensuring the exclusion of those who would do harm to the project site and its participants was essential for David's sense of security within the CI program.

Psychological Safety

In addition to feeling physically safe within the CI program, youth also described a kind of psychological safety. The youth exemplars provided an understanding of how they felt emotionally or psychologically safe, with 16 of them explicitly mentioning specific elements of the program site that made them feel this form of safety. For these youth, the CI program was a secure space within which they felt safe to grow and develop as individuals.

Clara provided an example by explaining why she felt safer in the CI project site than in her own home:

> Pues, como lo decía, muchas veces por lo mismo de los conflictos y todo eso que no te dan ganas ni de estar en tu casa. Yo, la verdad, que estar aquí [en CI], me siento súper bien. Cuando estoy en costura se me olvida todo, pero al llegar a la casa como que, ah mi realidad.

> [Well, like I said, many times because of the conflicts and all that, you don't even want to be at home. For me, honestly, being here [at the CI project site] I feel super good. When I am in [the sewing workshop] I forget everything, but when I get home it's like, oh my reality.]

As Clara reported, her "reality" or home space, with her sister, mother, and various stepfathers over the years, was less supportive than what she found within the CI program. She felt "super good" when she was at the CI project site, especially within the sewing workshop CI provides. Her comment reflects that CI provided a safe space where she was able to develop life and leadership skills as she has developed into one of the youth leaders of the workshop.

Similarly, Emilia spoke to the connection between physical and psychological safety. When asked about why she thinks it is important to focus on the safety of the participants, Emilia said, "Porque de la seguridad se obtiene la confianza y alguien sin confianza es como que no tiene propósito" ["Because from safety, you obtain confidence; and someone without confidence, it's like they don't have a purpose"]. Emilia's sense of safety allowed her to develop confidence, which ultimately led her toward a sense of purpose.

Physical and psychological safety co-act with social-relational safety as youth participate with and develop relationships among program participants and program staff. Whereas all participants talked about caring relationships with adults within the program, 14 of them also made specific connection between those caring relationships and a sense of feeling safe. Alejandra discussed a sense of confidence that came from her experiences within CI and the relationships she had built there. Prior to her participation in the CI program, Alejandra said that her life did not have a clear sense of purpose, but through her relationship with Sister Zamora (one of the CI project staff), she came to understand that her life had a direction and a purpose. Alejandra said:

> La hermana Zamora, ella me dice, "Si Él te lo ha dicho . . . es porque quiere un bien para vos. . . y vos piensas que Dios sí tiene un propósito para vos . . . vos intenta lograr que eso se cumpla," me dice. Y yo, por eso he cambiado. Porque Dios siento que ha ido intentando a cambiar ese propósito, que cumpla yo ese propósito. Pero por medio de otras personas, me he ido como enfocando, "Ese tu propósito para que lo cumplas," algo así.
>
> [Sister Zamora tells me, "If [God] has told you, it is because [God] wants something good for you. . . . And you think that God has a purpose for you . . . you should try to make it happen," she says. And that's why I have changed. Because I feel that God has been trying to change that purpose, that I fulfill that purpose. But through other people, he has been focusing me, "This is your purpose for you to fulfill," something like that.]

Her confidence in understanding this purpose enabled her to address a local problem within her CI community; namely, the youth group in her home community (not within her CI project site) had lost its direction and needed additional support. She expressed a desire to become involved there to support the youth group, and, though she noted her own hesitancy, it was through the encouragement and accompaniment of Sister Zamora that Alejandra felt confident in her desire to serve her community in this way.

Both Alejandra and Emilia had detected one of the primary goals of the social-relational safe space within CI; namely, the relationally safe environment allowed participants to develop a sense of confidence to explore various opportunities present in their context in search of a meaningful, life-giving sense of purpose.

Spiritual Safety

Spiritual safety was evidenced by participants' responses making specific reference to God and how their relationships with God made them feel safe. Of the 18 exemplar interviews, 12 of them explicitly noted ideas of spiritual safety, despite no direct question asking them to connect their relationship with God to their sense of feeling safe. For example, when asked about when he feels safe and protected, Adrian, age 19, responded, "me siento protegido cuando me levanto y antes, antes de levantarme, oro, y encomiendo mi vida al creador" ["I feel protected when I wake up and, before I get up, I pray and I entrust my life to the Creator"]. This act of prayer seemed to provide an overarching sense of safety that started every day. Similarly, Daniela, age 16, felt safe because she was close to God. She responded to a similar question saying, "que siempre ando en las manos de Dios. . . . sé que si voy algún lado Él me protege" ["I am always in the hands of God. . . . I know that if I go somewhere, [God] will protect me"]. Her closeness to God, as she noted, comes from spending time at the CI project site.

Providing further elaboration on how these exemplars experienced this sense of God-driven protection, when asked what makes him feel protected, David responded:

> El Señor. Algunos de aquí les dan miedo ir a meterse a otras partes porque, yo donde vengo, mi zona es bien peligrosa y sé me hace bien difícil venirme a meter aquí. . . . Algunos de aquí les dan miedo, pero a mí no me da miedo porque sé que el Señor siempre va a andar conmigo y nunca me va a abandonar, me siento protegido por Él.
>
> [The Lord. Some people here are afraid to go to other places because, where I come from, my area is very dangerous, and it makes it very difficult to come here. . . . Some here are afraid, but I am not scared because I know that the Lord is always going to be with me and He will never abandon me. I feel protected because of Him.]

When asked how God makes him feel protected, David said:

> Cuando yo voy a unas colonias o a algunas comunidades, siempre andan allí, jóvenes que andan perdidos, y andan con pistolas y solo se me quedan viendo. Y en mi mente, le digo al Señor, "Señor haz me invisible a todos los peligros de aquí, a todos ellos Señor." Y ya solo se me quedan viendo y no me dicen nada. Puedo entrar tranquilamente y puedo salir tranquilamente.
>
> [When I go to some neighborhoods or to some communities, they are always there, young people who are lost, and they are there with guns and they just stare at me. And in my mind, I say to the Lord, "Lord, make me invisible to all the dangers here, to all of them, Lord." And then they just keep staring at me, and they don't say anything to me. I can go in safely and leave safely.]

David's response suggested a sense of confidence that his faith in God brought to him. For him, his belief that God will protect him gave him the confidence to travel605 between different neighborhoods and to go about his day. Felipe echoed this sentiment, saying that having faith protects him wherever he goes.

Finally, Alejandra and Clara both pointed toward an understanding of safetywhere God works through others to keep them safe. Alejandra said, "Él que más loprotege es Dios a uno. Pero por medio de mi madre, Dios nos protege, por medio de ellos [su familia]" ["God is the one who most protects you. But through my mother, God protects us, through (my family)."] Clara also said, "Dios pone personas para que te apoyen" ["God places people there to support you"] in difficult times or unsafe situations. For both Alejandra and Clara, God's protection was mediated through others in their lives. For Gabriel, physical safety and spiritual safety were similarly interrelated. When asked where he feels most safe, his response was at the CI project site, because he was "en la casa de Dios" ["in the house of God"]. Whereas God is responsible for their safety, it is mediated through the people and places in their lives and interrelates directly with social-relational safety.

In summary, the CI-supported youth exemplars reported descriptions of a holistic sense of safety. In addition to physical safety, these youth expressed perceptions of psychological and social-relational safety. Furthermore, these thriving exemplars suggested a sense of safety might be derived from their spiritual development and sense of relationship with God.

Discussion

Youth safety has been specified as essential for effective youth development programs (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson & Walker, 2010; Lerner, 2004; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Vandell et al., 2015). However, prior to the present study, the literature on program safety did not systematically differentiate between objective measures of the presence of safety in youth programs, as defined by researchers or practitioners, and the phenomenological experiences of safety by youth program participants. Based on Spencer's (2007) RDS metatheory-based PVEST model, the aim of this study was to assess the use of this differentiation bystudying the components of youth perceptions of safety within a sample case of socioeconomically poor Salvadoran youth participating in the faith-based programs of CI.

Accordingly, the present study brought youth perspectives to bear on this important topic so as to move the literature beyond assumptions about safety. Preliminary quantitative data from the CI Study of PYD on perceptions

of safety (noted above) indicated that the majority of CI youth felt unsafe outside of the CI project site, while feeling safe within the project site. Understanding youth perceptions of the nuances of safety (and feeling safe) and will allow for practitioners to improve practices to enhance PYD, particularly within faith-based programs.

Consistent with expectations, physical safety was the most immediate form of safety found in the current study and the fundamental form of safety upon which other senses of safety were constructed. The physical space of the CI project site was salient to the youth in this study, and the physical door was a recurring theme as a visible reminder to how CI project staff kept youth safe while they participated in the program. Overt signs of safety led youth to feel safe and to declare that their program takes place in a safe space. Feeling physically safe contributed to youth feeling free to explore new activities and talents while engaging their peers and other program adults. This feeling led to a sense of confidence for some youth and an overall feeling of psychological safety that was often described alongside social-relational safety. This finding is not surprising because the CI youth development program features the Big Three key attributes of youth development programs658 (Lerner, 2004; Tirrell et al., 2020, 2021), of which the first attribute is sustained positive youth-adult relationships. CI project staff have created spaces where the connections between youth and the adults grow into positive forces within the lives of youth. These connections are further evidence that attention to a holistic sense of safety is imperative for youth development practitioners and programs.

In addition, youth in this faith-based program expressed a sense of safety 664emerging from their spirituality and relationship with God. To these youth, their personal relationship with God was an additional component to their feelings of safety and impacted how they felt both physically and psychologically safe. Youth responses also suggested that emphasizing a personal relationship with God might enhance their perception of other safety attributes the program has in place. For some youth within this study, their sense of spiritual safety was not constrained to the confines of the CI project site, offering them a sense of feeling protected throughout their day-to-day existence within their communities. For faith-based programs in similar contexts, this would seem to indicate an importance to curricula or programming that emphasizes a personal relationship with God (or transcendent other).

It is noteworthy that whereas a sense of spiritual safety inspired a sense of confidence in God's protection, we were unable to explore the extent to which such confidence might lead youth to take unnecessary risks. Several youth recognized that their feeling protected by God was mediated through the adults in their lives (both their family and adults within the program). Such mediation points to how spiritual safety is interrelated with relational safety. The connection to God is a relationship in itself and is one that, as these youth pointed out, is often mediated through others in their lives.

Limitations and Future Directions

Findings from the present study should be considered in light of theirlimitations. The current study involved a small number of thriving youth exemplars (n=18) from a single country, El Salvador. As such, the generalizability is limited 689 given the unique sociopolitical context of El Salvador. Furthermore, CI is a faith-based, Evangelical Protestant organization, and differences of theology, ideology, or manners of practicing their Christian faith may limit comparisons across other programs and contexts, including faith-based programs of other faiths and/or denominations. Although these findings provide new insights into how youth related with God and how that connection might enhance the perception of safety, it may not extend to youth who are not in faith-based youth development programs or who are less engaged with their spirituality. Future studies should explore youth perceptions of safety across diverse countries, contexts, faiths, and698 cultures, and with attention to specificity (see Bornstein, 2017, 2019).

In addition, the interviews with the Salvadoran youth were conducted by U.S.-based researchers. We attempted to offset this limitation by using local interpreters, collaborating with CI staff in El Salvador, and working with native speakers to complete the translation and back-translation of the interview protocol. However, our presence as outsiders may have affected the youth responses. Future studies might therefore include local interviewers to enhance ecological validity. Findings from the present study might also be considered hypothesis-generating. For instance, the data suggested that elements of the youth relationships with God may have characteristics of a secure-attachment-style relationship with God (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013; Wood et al., 2010). For youth living in unsafe neighborhoods, such an attachment relationship might provide a secure base from which they can explore their communities while growing into thriving adults.Programs such as CI already have a faith component incorporated into their programming, and future research should explore how an emphasis on a personal relationship with God

might be able to enhance a secure attachment to God, thus providing youth a sense of security to explore the world around them. Future research, with attention to the specificity principle (Bornstein, 2017, 2019) will allow researchers to explore which elements of spiritual development impact youth perceptions of safety and for which youth those elements are significant. Taking a longitudinal approach as well will enable exploration into how this relationship with God develops and changes over time and whether and how a strong relationship with God early in life leads to a lasting sense of safety over the lifetime. In addition, exploring these concepts across religious denominations might shine light on how different religious concepts or practices impact a sense of safety in youth.

Furthermore, while previous research and the current study seem to make clear that physical safety is a necessary prerequisite to other forms of safety, the relationship between these other elements to holistic safety are not well understood. Future research should seek to more deeply understand how physical safety impacts these components of holistic safety and how the relationship between these safeties might function.

Finally, this research focused exclusively on El Salvador in 2018. The ever-changing realities of safety within El Salvador—as exhibited by the government's anti-gang measures undertaken in 2022 (Associated Press, 2023)—point to need for continued study of youth perceptions of safety. Although theSalvadoran government's actions have been criticized internationally for their violations of human rights (Amnesty International, 2023), the actions taken may lead to an increased perception of security among Salvadoran citizens, thus impacting how youth understand their safety.

Conclusions

By using ideas from Spencer's (2007) PVEST model to explore the phenomenology of youth perceptions of safety in PYD programs, we have taken steps toward enhancing our understanding of how programs foster actual and perceived holistic safety for youth participants. Through elements such as security personnel at the physical door to the program site and caring adults cultivating relationships with youth, programs can better align with the perceptions of youth in the service of fostering holistic safety that enhance PYD. The emergence of a spiritual dimension of youth phenomenological experiences of safety within their context is novel and offers faith-based programs additional avenues to cultivate the perception of safety among youth participants. The current collaboration between researchers and practitioners lends support to continued partnerships with local organizations in order to understand the nuances around feasibility and implementation of safety-based practices.

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