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Research Article

The Developmental Assets Model for Positive Youth Development and Social Contribution: A Qualitative Study of Spanish Undergraduates

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Relational developmental systems theory integrates a positive youth development (PYD) perspective on the transition to adulthood. Meanwhile, the developmental assets (DAs) model describes the personal and contextual resources that nurture PYD. This study examined the fulfillment of DAs and experience of social contribution in a sample of 23 Spanish undergraduates from seven universities (age range 18–25, $M_{age} = 20.57$, SD = 2.06). Data were collected from seven focus groups, each comprising undergraduate students from different academic years, universities, and degree programs. All interviews were conducted in Spanish for 50–65 min and comprised eight questions divided into three sections (internal assets, external assets, and social contribution and barriers). The results indicated that among internal assets, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity were important for adolescents. Additionally, the external asset of social support was a highly relevant resource. Regarding social contribution, the participants showed empathy towards the needs of the community and reported that helping others was rewarding. Clearly, the youth's perspectives on their development should be considered while creating prevention and promotion programs that foster internal and external assets.

1. Introduction

Recent social changes, including increased time spent on education and difficulties in obtaining stable employment, have hindered youth emancipation and family formation [1]. In this context, scholars have proposed a period called emerging adulthood, which begins after adolescence and lasts until the age of 29 [2, 3]. Furthermore, the previous negative view of adolescent transition to adult life has been complemented by a more positive one thanks to an increasingly common research and practice perspective focused on promoting health and well-being as well as the skills and resources implicated [4, 5]. Based on a positive perspective of the transition to adulthood, scholars have proposed the positive youth development (PYD) model in the United States, incorporating concepts such as "plasticity," "psychological well-being," and "thriving." These concepts position adolescents as active agents of change [6–9]. This model

aligns with relational–developmental theory [10], which postulates that psychological adjustment depends on the positive reciprocal relationships between individuals and their contexts [11–13]. Specifically, this metamodel describes the interrelationships between adolescents' strengths and their contexts, which help promote PYD and youth contribution to society [14, 15].

This perspective underlines the importance of promoting well-being and healthy lifestyles by developing each adolescent's strengths, together with nurturing appropriate contextual conditions [9, 16–18]. Nevertheless, this positive perspective does not negate the possibility that adolescents may experience difficulties, such as conflicts with their parents [19], emotional instability [20], and possible risk behaviors [21]. Thus, positive development emerges from positive relationships with their context based on a synchrony between their strengths and adequate contextual resources, called developmental assets (DAs) [17, 22–24]. This relational–developmental systems theory integrates two widely validated models: the 5Cs and DAs models.

1.1. The Spanish Context. Spain has one of the lowest percentages of young people in the European Union, with 10,094,500 youths between the ages of 15 and 29 years (50.5% male), most of whom reside in provincial capitals. Additionally, Spain has one of the highest youth unemployment rates, which is nearly 30% among 15–24-year-old youth and approximately 20% among 25–29-year-old youth. In line with data from other countries, women are the most affected, with a higher prevalence of temporary contracts, poorer working conditions, and lower gross annual income [25–27]. Consequently, the average age at which young people become independent has increased from 28.3 years in 2009 to 29.3 years in 2017, although women tend to leave home earlier than men [28].

Concerning civic participation and engagement, the Spanish Youth Council's survey of young people aged 14–30 years yielded interesting insights. First, Spanish youth exhibited a low interest in politics: Only 17% participated in a youth organization, and around a third were involved in any kind of activism (feminism, climate change, politics, etc.). Second, the main concerns were housing policy, working conditions, mental health measures, and climate change [29]. Regarding social contribution, a study by the Fundación Mutua Madrileña [30] revealed that 85% of youth aged 16–34 expressed their desire to collaborate with a nongovernmental organization (NGO). Only a quarter indicated a lack of awareness regarding the existence of NGOs, and two-thirds expressed the belief that NGOs may solve issues more effectively than the government.

1.2. The 5Cs Model. The 5Cs model of PYD, proposed by Lerner et al. [13], describes five interrelated components: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring. Competence is defined as a positive view of oneself in various areas. Confidence encompasses self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence. Character is related to respect for the social values associated with community life. Connection refers to having positive relationships with others (family, friends, neighbors, etc.). Finally, caring involves sympathy and empathy towards others. If these five components are satisfied, a sixth component emerges: contribution. Youths with positive development can make contributions to themselves and their family, friends, neighborhood, school, and community. Furthermore, this can decrease the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors [22]. An important characteristic of this 5Cs model is that all these components can be nurtured in all development contexts [14, 15]. The model has been validated in a 7-year longitudinal study in the United States within the 4-H Study [31]. Additionally, research shows that thriving and PYD emerge when the context provides adolescents with opportunities to engage in productive activities, such as volunteer work [22, 32]. Participation in such extracurricular activities improves self-esteem, self-control, and responsibility [33]. PYD-based interventions are effective in enhancing life satisfaction [34], promoting prosocial behavior, reducing antisocial conduct, and preventing risky behavior [13, 35].

1.3. DAs Model. DA, proposed by Benson, Scales, and Syvertsen [36] and validated by Theokas et al. [24], describes the individual and contextual resources that facilitate PYD promotion [37]. A total of 40 assets have been identified, comprising 20 internal and external assets each [38]. Internal assets are divided into four personal skills: commitment to learning (achievement motivation, school engagement, leisure reading, and attachment to school), positive values (equality and social justice, integrity, honesty, and responsibility), social competencies (decision-making, interpersonal skills, cultural competence, resilience skills, and assertiveness), and positive identity (self-esteem, personal agency, life purpose, and hope). External assets refer to the resources belonging to the developmental contexts, such as the family, school, and community. This group is also divided into four categories: support (family support, positive family communication, relationships with other adults, warm school climate, safe neighborhood, and parental school involvement), empowerment (community that values the role of youth and youth perception as a resource for the community), boundary expectations (positive expectations and boundaries in the family, school, and neighborhood), and constructive use of time (creative activities, cultural leisure activities, and healthy lifestyle in leisure time). All these assets are cumulative such that the more their presence, the more the PYD. These DAs encourage the youth's healthy development away from risky behaviors [5, 38], better academic performance, increased curiosity about other cultures, and greater engagement in prosocial behaviors [36, 39]. Conversely, adolescents with low DAs tend to show lower PYD scores. In turn, this may increase the frequency of behavioral and emotional problems [5].

Figure 1 shows the relational–developmental systems theory described by Lerner et al. [10]. This metamodel integrates individual-context relationships throughout development. Promoting youth strengths, such as commitment to learning or positive identity, and positive contextual resources (e.g., family support) together can yield higher PYD scores. This alignment of strengths and context resources promotes PYD, as well as increases civic

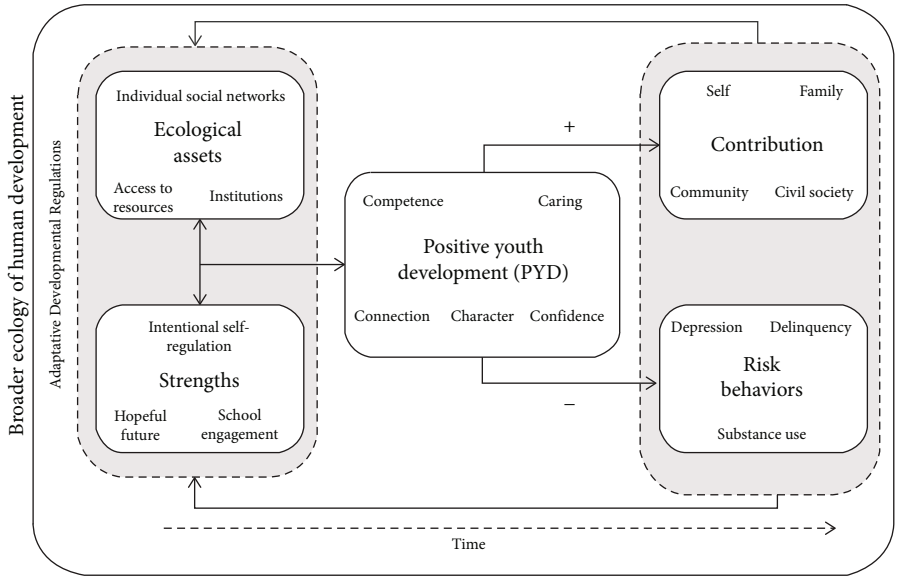

FIGURE 1: Relational–developmental systems theory (adapted from Lerner et al. [10]).

engagement and reduces risk behaviors. To date, most studies have focused on the PYD model within relational developmental system models, with less attention paid to the DAs framework. Meanwhile, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence for this DAs model in the Spanish context, addressing the perception of the level of satisfaction with internal and external assets as well as the experiences of social contribution.

1.4. Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence. Quantitative research, predominantly from the United States, has supported the validity of the PYD and DAs models. On the PYD model, studies have consistently shown positive correlations between PYD and various outcomes, such as improved interpersonal skills, better academic performance, and reduced engagement in risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol and drug use) [14, 25, 40–42]. Studies from Europe also have similar findings, showing that the 5Cs are associated with better psychological adjustment [43, 44], higher academic performance [45], resilience to bullying [46], and higher life satisfaction [47, 48]. However, the caring component has some contradictory outcomes, such as a positive association with emotional problems, which may be due to potential deficits in emotional coping skills [49–51]. Meanwhile, on DAs, research across diverse cultural contexts—Albania, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Japan, and the Philippines—showed that having more DAs was associated with better PYD outcomes [37]. European samples showed similar patterns as well [52, 53]. Interestingly, some studies have highlighted a more remarkable impact of internal assets on well-being compared to external assets [54, 55].

However, these studies have predominantly been quantitative. Tevington et al. [56] highlighted that qualitative evidence is also needed because the unique use of quantitative data may distort the understanding of relational developmental systems theory. Furthermore, by capturing the voices of youth, qualitative data may offer a more contextualized perspective in understanding the associations among DAs, PYD, and social contribution. However, to the best of our knowledge, very few studies have used qualitative methodologies to examine the validity of these models. Additionally, studies have mainly focused on the PYD model, with no qualitative evidence for the DAs model. Furthermore, the qualitative evidence for the PYD model mainly came from intervention studies that examined youth voices. A 1-year longitudinal study conducted in New Zealand with adolescents aged 11–13 years found that PYD-based programs increased the 5Cs and community contribution [57]. The connection component played a central role, besides competence and confidence. A study in disadvantaged areas in the Southern United States with those aged 7–19 years sought to enhance their empowerment through these PYD programs [58]. The results revealed that connection, along with confidence, character, and behavioral competence, increased community participation. In turn, this was associated with improved academic performance, reduced school dropout rates, and improved problem-solving skills. In another qualitative research with a longitudinal design in the United States [59], the 4-H study identified social relationships and community engagement as significant factors, particularly among African-American youth, for their overall well-being. In China, the Tin Ka Ping Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programs (TKP PATHS) project was based on the PYD approach in educational settings [60]. Interviews with teachers who had implemented the program revealed that it produced positive outcomes in their own lives, including better relationships with students, parents, and their own children. Moreover, the participants identified benefits such as increased collaboration with other educators and the development of more effective emotional regulation strategies. Additionally, teachers highlighted a shift in focus from academic performance to student well-being.

Overall, qualitative evidence is needed on the presence of internal and external DAs, and experiences of social contribution.

1.5. Research Question. Most research on the relational developmental systems model has focused on the PYD theory, with less attention paid to DAs. Most evidence on DAs have been collected using North American samples, such as Lerner et al. [13] and Benson, Scales, and Syvertsen [38], predominantly using quantitative designs, with no qualitative evidence to date, as far as we know.

As such, more research is needed to further validate the relational development systems theory [22, 37] with a qualitative analysis of the DAs model. This may allow a deeper understanding of how personal and contextual resources are integrated and encourage PYD and social contribution. Furthermore, DAs research using qualitative designs is needed in other countries, such as Spain. Because of the social circumstances of Spanish youth, with high unemployment rates, problematic working conditions, and difficulties in emancipation, together with reduced opportunities to provide meaningful social contributions, a qualitative study of DAs and social contribution experiences on this population may provide valuable insights for policy design.

Addressing this gap, this study explored DAs and social contribution among Spanish undergraduates by analyzing (a) the perception of internal assets (i.e., skills and strengths), (b) perception of external assets (i.e., contextual support and barriers), and (c) experience of social contribution and possible difficulties.

2. Methods

2.1. Design. An exploratory qualitative cross-sectional study was conducted with seven focus groups, each comprising undergraduates of different academic years, universities, and degree programs. The study was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Huelva on January 10, 2019.

2.2. Sampling and Recruitment. Eligible participants were randomly selected for the project "Positive Youth Development in Spanish University Students" (see protocol study in Gomez-Baya et al. [61]). A total of 70 selected undergraduates were contacted via email and invited to participate, of which approximately one-third agreed to join the focus groups. Prior to their participation, the students provided written informed consent. They participated without receiving any rewards and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. In addition, they were informed that the data would be anonymized and processed accordingly.

Eventually, 23 participants were involved in the study (age range: 18–25, $M_{age} = 20.57$, SD = 2.06; 56.2% female). They were undergraduates from seven universities located in various autonomous communities across Spain, ensuring a diverse sample size. The universities and their respective number of participants were Loyola University (Sevilla) (7), University of Santiago de Compostela (6), University of Huelva (4), University of La Laguna (2), University of Salamanca (2), Complutense University of Madrid (1), and University of Valencia (1). The undergraduates were studying different degrees: psychology (5), English philology (2), international relations (2), criminology (1), pedagogy (1), classical studies (1), economics and international relations (1), history (1), modern languages and literature (1), laws and international relations (1), human nutrition and dietetics (1), robotics and mechatronics engineering (1), philosophy (1), veterinary medicine (1), medicine (1), Spanish language and literature (1), and industrial organization engineering (1). In terms of academic year, the sample was distributed as follows: first (1), second (4), third (9), fourth (7), and fifth years (for double degree studies, 2). The distribution of the participants by focus group is presented in Table 1.

2.3. Data Collection. Data were collected between September and October 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were conducted in Spanish using the Zoom online platform because of COVID-19 restrictions. The interview duration was between 50 and 65 min. Furthermore, an external psychologist was hired and trained by the research team to conduct the focus groups. A structured interview consisting of eight questions was used to guide the focus groups. The questions were divided into three broad topics: (i) internal assets (i.e., personal skills and perceived difficulties), (ii) external assets (i.e., social support and external barriers), and (iii) social contribution (i.e., experiences of contribution to others and barriers to exhibiting more contribution) (see Table 2). The focus group dialogue was audio recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. This protocol was developed by the research team based on the theoretical model. The questions included in each section were selected by consensus based on the content and clarity for the purpose of the study. Within the DAs model, the first block addressed the internal resources or personal strengths needed for PYD, while the second block explored the external assets or social resources that encourage PYD. The third block examined experiences of social contribution, which is defined in the relational developmental systems model as a consequence of PYD.

2.4. Data Analysis. The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim, and participant information was anonymized. This transcription was manually conducted by the research team, while the analysis was performed using NVivo 11 [62]. NVivo is an advanced tool that optimizes qualitative data analysis, centralizes and organizes information to facilitate in-depth content examination, and yields valuable insights from the responses provided in the focus groups. Following an in-depth analysis of the discourses extracted from the focus groups, a coding scheme was established to facilitate comparison and interpretation of the qualitative results based on the DAs model (see Table 3). Then, these responses were interpreted following the categories of internal and external assets described in the model by Benson, Scales, and Syvertsen [36].

Table 1: Distribution of participants in focus groups.

Focus group (FG)	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
FG1	F, 19, ULL	M, 20, LU	M, 22, UHU	F, 21, LU
FG2	F, 19, USC	M, 18, USC	M, 22, LU	
FG3	F, 19, USC	M, 20, LU	M, 19, UV	
FG4	F, 18, USC	M, 22, USC	M, 20, USAL	
FG5	F, 20, UHU	F, 24, USAL	M, 25, CUM	F, 19, USC
FG6	F, 24, UHU	F, 20, ULL	F, 19, LU	F, 19, UHU
FG7	M, 20, LU	F, 24, LU		

Abbreviations: CUM: Complutense University of Madrid; F: female; LU: Loyola University; M: male; UHU: University of Huelva; ULL: University of La Laguna; USAL: University of Salamanca; USC: University of Santiago; UV: University of Valencia.

Table 2: Focus group interview.

Section 1: internal assets		
1. First of all, I would want to discuss your perceived skills. What skills do you believe you have?	2. Do you believe that these skills are common in individuals of your age? What other skills or qualities do you identify in others of similar age?	
Section 2: external assets		
1. I would also want to know your opinion about the support available for young people in your environment. If you think about your environment (i.e., the people with whom you have some kind of relationship, the spaces where you live, your family, the university, the neighborhood, or any other context of your life), what elements or characteristics do you think that promote the development of young people?	2. What elements or characteristics do you think may interfere with it?	3. If you think about your personal experiences, could you describe a situation in which you perceived that a contextual factor (e.g., family, friends, or others) facilitated or impeded your personal development?
Section 3: social contribution		
1. Now, I want to talk about the role of young people in the society. If I ask you about your contribution to society, what would you tell me? What do you think you contribute to society? In what way? It is not enough to consider only the major contributions; you can also consider those contributions that are significant even on a small scale	2. In your experience, do you believe that young people are motivated to engage in activities that contribute to the improvement of our society? If so, could you provide an example?	3. Finally, we would want to identify barriers that hinder young people's possibility to contribute to society, as well as the strategies that may facilitate such contributions. What barriers do you perceive in your context that hinder your possibility to contribute to society? Conversely, what strategies can facilitate your contributions?

3. Results

3.1. Internal Assets

3.1.1. Cognitive Skills. Seven participants highlighted the increased ease in sustaining their attention and reading comprehension. "When I read a text, I usually understand it easily" (Focus group (FG) 6). Regarding knowledge acquisition, young people were aware of their ability to learn languages more easily. A participant stated: "Many young people are learning a multitude of languages with remarkable ease" (FG6). These skills are related to the internal asset called commitment to learning.

Participants were also more aware of current social movements: "There is a higher awareness of topics than before, for example, climate change or feminism, LGBTI right" (FG7). Four participants indicated that they had high critical thinking. They questioned what had already been established in order to seek new priorities. For instance, one participant noted: "This thing has been always done in this same way, so why do we have to follow that way?" (FG1). Furthermore, young people considered themselves tolerant and empathic, and looked forward to doing things outside their comfort zones, such as traveling, reading, or talking to people from different cultures. Another participant stated: "I think that enriching yourself from other cultures is important, to become more tolerant and more empathetic" (FG3). These competencies are closely associated with the internal asset called positive values.

3.1.1.1. Difficulties in Cognitive Skills. Five participants reported a sustained lack of attention since the COVID-19 pandemic both regarding themselves and other youth. While some participants were able to concentrate better in online classes, others did better in the face-to-face format. One

Table 3: Coding scheme for analysis.

Section 1: internal assets							
Skills				Difficulties			
Cognitive	Behavioral	Social	Emotional	Cognitive	Behavioral	Social	Emotional
Section 2: external assets							
Support and resources				Barriers			
Proximal context	Educational and institutional	Technological	Social and cultural	Educational and institutional	Technological	Socioeconomic and labor	Social and cultural
Section 3: social contribution and barriers							
Social contribution	Resources for contribution			Personal barriers		Institutional barriers	

participant stated, "I think that, as a result of the pandemic, we are experiencing that it is harder for people to concentrate…" (FG2). Three participants focused on other difficulties, such as the difficulty to prioritize pending tasks following an order ("If I have things to do from university, I find hard to plan how much time to dedicate to each thing and what order to follow," FG2), excessive demands based on their actual abilities ("People are not realistic about their abilities," FG2), and toxic positivity that can lead to fake expectations ("There are people who tell you that you can do it everything, but it is not true," FG4).

3.1.2. Behavioral Abilities. After the events experienced during the pandemic, young people exhibited a heightened desire to be more connected with what is occurring worldwide. One young person stated, "The global pandemic has encouraged young individuals to become increasingly interested in a wide range of topics and issues that previously held no attention from them" (FG1). Additionally, they highlighted the capacity for effort and sacrifice. Consequently, some participants concluded that the current generation is more involved in their activities than the previous generations, even simultaneously performing several activities. For instance, a participant noted: "What defines us the most is our effort capacity" (FG3). This effort capacity is well connected with the internal asset named commitment to learning.

Three participants identified the skills required for assistance, which are well associated with the internal asset called positive values. They reported that the younger generations were more empathetic. One participant stated, "I believe that youth are more sensitive to show their feelings or to ask for help" (FG6). Adaptive skills and the capacity to manage new technologies were also well mentioned. Participants agreed that they used electronic devices on the Internet from an early age, which facilitated their adaptation to these technologies. One participant stated, "I perceive that we adapt more easily to new situations, as well as regarding the use of everything related to the Internet" (FG3).

3.1.2.1. Difficulties in Behavioral Skills. Young people identified irresponsibility as a possible deficiency. For example, a participant said, "Well, I feel that, in my generation, we talk a lot about rights, but just a bit about the responsibilities we respectively have" (FG4). They also mentioned impatience as a negative attribute: "I think that young people tend to be impatient. And patience really is an excellent quality" (FG4).

3.1.3. Social Skills. Nine students mentioned empathy and active listening as important skills. They argued that today's society places greater emphasis on their role in caring for others. For instance, one participant stated, "People in our age group are more empathetic and show more care about others" (FG3). Youth focused their discourse on the standardization they perceived concerning the possibility of sharing personal problems with other people without fear of feeling rejected: "I think that youth are more sensitive to share their feelings and ask for help" (FG6). Along similar lines, two women affirmed that today, men have more emotional expression compared to men from previous generations ("I feel that we are taking off that armor, it is more standardized among young people, and especially among children. Men are overcoming the shield that says that boys do not cry", FG6). These strengths are well associated with the internal asset called social competencies.

Good dialogue with others was underlined as a relevant resource. Participants believed that they have more in-depth conversations today than other generations had some decades ago. One participant argued that this improvement in conversations has emerged in part thanks to the pandemic experience: "I think there is much more discussion now than before" (FG1). Moreover, the ability to work in a team and sociability were highlighted, while an increased ease of cooperating with others was acknowledged: "We have more ability to socialize and do things in a group together, what helps us to make the task easier" (FG4). Another social skill reported was tolerance; four participants stated that, in general terms, the present generation is more tolerant of those who are different.

3.1.3.1. Difficulties in Social Skills. Seven students reported potential changes in sociability and communication skills. Specifically, before the virtualization of social life during the pandemic, there was better social communication than today. One individual said, "I would also say that one effect of the new technologies is an increased introversion in some people" (FG3). Other needs were identified in the areas of cultural intolerance and sexual diversity. Young people noted that sexual identity needs more support: "There is more acceptance, but I think there is still a long way to go. I think that gender identities still need more social

acceptance" (FG1). Individualism and excessive competitiveness were identified as social deficiencies by six participants. They did not perceive a supportive or collaborative attitude among their peers, with a participant stating: "We are part of a group that shares some same characteristics, but instead of working together to reach our common goals, we separate ourselves" (FG7).

3.1.4. Emotional Skills. Five participants acknowledged an increased capacity for self-awareness. Some indicated that they prioritized their own needs and knew their goals and interests better, avoiding activities incompatible with their values compared to previous life stages. An illustrative response is as follows: "It is becoming easier for me to understand my thoughts, motivations, and emotions" (FG1). Regarding self-respect, young people wanted to be congruent with their desires and thoughts: "I prefer to focus on […] my needs, something I didn't do before" (FG1). These emotional skills may be included within the internal asset called positive identity.

Furthermore, students emphasized the importance of mental health. They indicated that some taboos have been broken in current society. Specifically, today, mental disorders receive the same importance as physical problems. One example is: "Our parents or grandparents don't see it as usual. We are normalizing it, like going to the doctor" (FG6). Similarly, young people stated that poor mental health may affect cognitive abilities such as attention: "There is a point where you cannot pay attention, and it's hard to retain knowledge" (FG2).

3.1.4.1. Difficulties in Emotional Skills. Nine participants highlighted a high prevalence of mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression. Some symptoms of poor psychological adjustment such as discouragement, apathy, suicidal thoughts, and loneliness have also been acknowledged. These participants believed that many of these problems arose from excessive social demands, such as living beyond one's possibilities, high self-demands, or the effects of confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, one participant stated, "Many people think that young people are very passive, but this is due to excessive demands" (FG1). Similarly, the role of the psychologist has become more prominent as a qualified professional in dealing with this kind of problem. Emotional regulation skills were mentioned as very necessary in daily life: "I think [...] that we lack emotional skills. If something happens to us, we don't know how to deal with it" (FG5).

3.2. External Assets

3.2.1. Supports and Resources From the Proximal Context. Fourteen young people indicated that their parents were a main source of unconditional personal, economic, and emotional support: "I guess we all have our family when we need it. They are the ones we talk to about everything, and they know what happens to us in a daily routine. They also solve problems for us" (FG3). The social values taught by the family were considered very relevant for them: "My parents always taught me that you must work in a team all your life. Working alone is not a good option" (FG7).

Friends were also mentioned as an important support by 12 participants: "I talk a lot with my friends about a lot of things. But there are some issues that I know that they won't be able to help me, and I should talk with my parents. I know how to differentiate between whether I should ask my friends or my parents for help" (FG3). Moreover, the professor's figure was also very remarkable in the lives of some young people as a source of personal support: "Professors are very proximal and [...] they helped me a lot to deal with issues that affected my mental health and my personal development" (FG2). All these statements are associated with the external assets called support and positive expectations.

3.2.2. Educational and Institutional Support and Resources. The accessibility to higher education through student grants was very relevant for six youth ("Grants are essential for me, because otherwise I would not be able to study at university," FG6). Two participants also highlighted the psychological support offered by the university as another remarkable support: "University insurance allows you to have access to a psychologist for free" (FG6). The labor market seminars organized by the universities were also useful to get more information about job opportunities ("There are a lot of seminars where they provide a lot of information about different career opportunities" FG6). Similarly, the student mentoring program was also highlighted: "There are students who try to guide others and help them with doubts about […] schedules, mobility, subjects…" (FG2). These resources could be related to the external asset named empowerment.

3.2.2.1. Barriers to Educational Development. Participants identified some obstacles to implementing online learning during the transition to this modality during the pandemic. Nine participants highlighted the limitations of this modality, particularly the lack of in-person interaction with classmates and teachers: "I don't like online classes, because sitting down in front of a screen is not the same as being inside a classroom in order to take some notes" (FG2). Another barrier mentioned was the lack of emotional education in the educational system, while there is a unique focus on academic aspects: "All professors pay more focus on the academic aspects and not pay enough attention to how the student feel and how they are able to cope with their emotions" (FG6). They emphasized the importance of professional skills training: "In medicine, they don't teach us how to interact with the patient. They don't teach some skills that we need to work with people" (FG4).

3.2.2.2. Institutional Barriers. One significant barrier was the lack of information about how to access psychological support from universities. Six young people indicated that access to free mental health services would be beneficial in providing some help beyond the academic sphere. One participant stated, "It is true that there is a psychologist like in the Publish health system. Only very few people access to

these professionals because the information about this service is not well distributed. It is difficult to get an appointment, and visiting a private psychologist is very expensive" (FG6). Participants also discussed the limited resources available for psychological care in the public health system: "I also requested an appointment with a psychologist in the public health system, but I did not get any support because I had that appointment 6 months later" (FG3). Five participants agreed about the economic difficulties related with university: "If you fail a subject, you must pay the double for the tuition. I don't understand why you have to pay the double if you are going to study the same subject again" (FG5).

3.2.3. Technological Support and Resources. Eight participants found notable support from information and communication technologies. The Internet was an important resource for learning and social connections, even for learning new languages. For instance, a participant said, "You have access to meet more people who have the same hobbies, with the same vision of the world or the same opinions" (FG7). These resources could be classified into the external assets named empowerment and support.

3.2.3.1. Technological Barriers. Youths argued that they experienced lesser face-to-face social contact in favor of the digital medium, which tended to promote more introversion and lower-quality communication. Four participants expressed the opinion that text messages do not provide the same depth of information as an in-person conversation. For instance, one participant remarked, "This can be detrimental, because you are losing some social skills. Talking to other people through a computer is different because the nonverbal communication we have in person is missing" (FG7). Furthermore, two participants noted that the appearance and personality that people usually present on the social networks often differ from those in the real life: "If you create your social relations only by the computer interactions, how do you know if that person is telling you the truth, or if that person really exists?" (FG7).

3.2.4. Social and Cultural Support and Resources. Six youths indicated that their generation was becoming increasingly tolerant of discussing mental health and requesting psychologists' assistance. This attitude may facilitate the possibility of identifying the underlying problems, without the fear or taboos that previously constrained them: "We are part of a generation that gives importance to mental health" (FG1). Besides mental health resources, they identified some cultural resources for leisure time, such as theater, cinema, or watching series ("There are many things to do and we have always many […] films to watch, […] I love watching series, I love reading…," FG1). These resources could be classified into the external asset named constructive use of time.

3.2.4.1. Socioeconomic and Employment Barriers. Three participants stated that they did not feel that they were included as a target population in social policies. They identified a lack of policies, laws, and financial support to provide resources for young people: "I would love to say that politicians are developing a resource support system for young people, but I think they are not" (FG2). Three participants also reported economic difficulty in accessing free psychological care: "If you are a student, finding a psychologist out of the public health system is very expensive" (FG6).

Seven participants indicated that very high demands in the labor market were a major barrier. Their responses referred to the lack of work experience and the high demand for university degrees and languages. For instance, one participant noted, "I believe that much more is now required than before to be able to get a stable job" (FG1). In addition, the lack of good labor conditions and few job opportunities created a great uncertainty and difficulty to become economically independent: "I think that the illusion of studying hard to get a good job does not correspond with reality... But we cannot forget that we are now suffering an economic crisis" (FG5).

3.2.4.2. Sociocultural Barriers. Three participants noted that the high expectations from adults and the self-undervaluation from youth may cause some discomfort: "Young people live in a constant comparison with the past. Older people always tell us: 'In my time, I worked and studied at the same time'" (FG1). Self-labelling was also a limiting aspect for some young people: "We also used to create labels over ourselves, what we are and what we like. And I think we shouldn't follow that, because we have the freedom to decide what we want to be" (FG1).

Moreover, they identified another barrier: the possible underestimation of mental health problems. One participant highlighted that although mental health is increasingly considered crucial, not everyone paid the necessary attention to these needs: "There are some psychopathologies that affect us, such as anxiety. These are very serious problems. I believe that there are professors or classmates who do not give it the importance it really has" (FG2).

According to three participants' opinion, certain repetitive news in the media caused them rejection ("We get bored about the repetition of the same news constantly. Thus, the important news was finally ignored," FG3). Additionally, two participants focused on the society's tendency to favor individualistic and competitive values. For example, one of these participants noted, "I think that the society in which we live is very individualistic, […] it encourages the skills to be more competitive with others" (FG5).

3.3. Social Contribution

3.3.1. Social Contribution and Its Resources. Seven undergraduates acknowledged having a positive attitude towards volunteering. Four indicated that they knew some youths participating in NGOs. Collectively, they considered the youth to be more involved in helping and contributing to others because they are more tolerant and have more tools and resources available, such as the Internet: "Young people are more socially active nowadays. Besides, technology makes it possible, you can help people thousands of kilometers away" (FG5). Three participants, due to the pandemic, became more reluctant to make certain social plans if there

was a risk of contagion for others: "If we reject a plan that we consider as potentially dangerous, we are already contributing because we say: We don't want to infect others" (FG1).

Similarly, three participants pointed out that their increased awareness towards mental health, climate change, and LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) rights can help other generations to follow these social movements: "We are moving forward to cope with social problems and have more awareness regarding the importance of contributing" (FG7). Five young people reported that they felt more prepared, with more resources and more critical thinking and without taboos or prejudices when discussing any topic, compared to youth some decades ago. Three participants emphasized that contributing to a social cause can help to become better people and feel more satisfied with life, "I believe that having have more critical thinking than young people had in past generations means that we can contribute much more" (FG1).

Regarding the resources that may promote social contribution among young people, the information provided from the focus groups suggested that initiatives by the university and faculty members about volunteer programs helped them to contribute to others: "People are encouraged to participate in mentoring or volunteering programs in my university" (FG2). In addition, social media was a positive resource by showing the problems suffered in the different parts of the world: "There is much more visibility of everything that is happening in the world" (FG3).

3.3.2. Barriers to Social Contribution. By analyzing participants' responses, barriers can be categorized as institutional and personal. Among institutional barriers, five participants highlighted insufficient funding and support from government institutions. For instance, one participant stated, "I believe that young people are highly motivated to take action, but sometimes there is a lack of proposals from institutions" (FG1). Another barrier was the inadequate dissemination of information about volunteer initiatives: "I think there are a lot of very interesting projects. But [...] I feel that there is not enough information. We don't receive the information about these projects" (FG4). Regarding personal barriers, five youths indicated that time constraints inhibit their contributions. They had difficulties in dedicating time for social contribution when they had many academic tasks: "There is a lack of time. We are so stressed with so many tasks, it seems that university life is only about studying" (FG4).

4. Discussion

The relational developmental systems model was developed in North America and aimed at increasing the focus on fostering strengths in adolescents and young people jointly with nurturing contexts that promote PYD and contribution [9]. Integrated into this framework, the DAs model describes the personal assets and contextual resources that may support PYD [36]. Extant research supporting the DAs paradigm has predominantly used quantitative methodologies. However, these methodologies do not flexibly explore young people's reflections of their own development and the experiences with these assets [56]. A qualitative methodology can enable a further examination of young people's voices to aid in designing guidelines and recommendations for intervention programs based on their own perspectives and perceived needs. As such, this qualitative study explored Spanish undergraduates' perception of satisfaction with both internal and external DAs and their experiences of social contribution. Specifically, according to the relational–developmental systems model, the satisfaction of both internal and external DAs is required to reach PYD, with social contribution emerging as a consequence of PYD. Thus, this qualitative study effectively highlighted the antecedents and consequences of PYD based on this theoretical model. The present study showed qualitative evidence for the DAs model, underlining the differentiation between internal (i.e., commitment to learning, positive values, positive identity, and social competences) and external assets (i.e. support, expectations, empowerment, and constructive use of time).

Specifically, this study identified the following elements: (a) the perception of internal assets for PYD (i.e., skills and difficulties), (b) perception of external assets for PYD (i.e., contextual support and barriers), and (c) experiences of social contribution. Regarding the first topic, participants highlighted critical thinking as a remarkable skill among young people, along with increased self-awareness and self-respect. These skills may contribute to developing their own self-worth (i.e., positive identity) and prosocial values towards others (i.e., positive values) [38]. These DAs can foster greater PYD, particularly in the confidence and character dimensions [13]. Moreover, participants mentioned attention-related challenges when attending online classes during the pandemic. At the behavioral level, they acknowledged some personal strengths, such as responsibility, effort, and social skills, which can be included within internal assets that may contribute to their academic and social development (i.e., commitment to learning and social competencies) [36]. Several previous studies have emphasized the relevance of internal assets in promoting PYD [54, 55]. Some behavioral difficulties were also mentioned, including impatience and irresponsibility. Another difficulty was the elevated stress derived from excessively high expectations.

Regarding external assets, participants emphasized the support received from their proximal contexts, such as family, friends, and professors. The external assets of support and expectations were highlighted by the participants. Consistent with the literature, the existence of positive social relationships is a fundamental asset for youth well-being, as underlined the connection component [57, 58]. DAs theory also emphasizes the importance of support from family, peers, and the community as external assets to promote PYD. In the educational context, participants noted the lack of emotional education and mental health protection initiatives for young people. Here, evidence-based socioemotional programs is an important and necessary resource for fostering improvements in emotional understanding and coping with stressful situations. With a proper development of socioemotional competencies, the caring component of

PYD can better protect psychological well-being [43, 44]. Furthermore, due to connection's importance for well-being, the lack of social support can create emotional and social difficulties [5]. Additionally, participants reported some institutional resources, such as study grants and psychological services at the university, as well as the social values learned from their families. They acknowledged the increased ease of discussing psychological disorders and talking about their emotions and personal difficulties. However, participants reported some difficulties in accessing the labor market as a barrier to achieving economic independence. Among sociocultural factors, participants highlighted that the very high expectations and a lack of awareness about mental health issues in adults, as well as the cultural trend towards competitiveness, were barriers to youth thriving. Thus, empowerment and constructive use of time were two important external assets for the participants. Community assets can empower young people by providing positive feedback, trust, and mentoring [5]. Meanwhile, two institutional level barriers were described: the reduced inclusion of young people in political programs and need for free psychological services. The deficit model assumed by administrations may lead adolescents to believe that they are a problem to be addressed rather than a resource for civil society. Consequently, program design may emerge that is not sensitive to their adolescents' own needs [7, 8]. Many concerns expressed in this qualitative study are consistent with the Spanish Youth Council's results [29] regarding youth concerns regarding mental health, housing policies, and the labor situation.

Finally, the experiences of social contribution and barriers encountered were discussed. On social contribution, many young people reported participating or knowing people who collaborated in volunteer activities in NGOs. Those who volunteered expressed a great sense of gratification from helping others. Moreover, they believed that other colleagues would join these activities and could potentially promote greater awareness of the importance of caring for others in subsequent generations. These insights are consistent with the Spanish report by Fundacion Mutua Madrileña on youth NGO participation [30] and the barriers that could explain the reduced social engagement observed by the Spanish Youth council [29]. Being involved in such extracurricular activities is closely associated with PYD, as noted by the relational developmental systems theory, thereby improving social competencies, communication skills, and psychological well-being [32, 33]. Contribution was considered a consequence of satisfying the 5Cs of PYD because they increased the desire to help make the world a better place to live [22, 59]. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the awareness of others' needs and a sense of community. Some participants mentioned that they avoided visiting places where they could infect or be infected. These findings are consistent with those of Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg and Lerner et al. [16, 31] on youth contributions. Positive development in youth is associated with an increased commitment to take care of others, greater sensitivity to social needs, and avoiding risky behaviors. However, participants also reported some barriers that hinder their social contribution. First, high academic demands, with many exams and homework, and having a job (in some cases) did not allow them to spend time helping others or collaborating with NGOs. Moreover, if they participate, they may experience an added burden rather than a rewarding activity [59]. Finally, participants mentioned an institutional barrier regarding the lack of opportunities for youth-led solidarity projects and absence of clear information about other available opportunities.

4.1. Study Limitations. First, the data were collected some months after social distancing and home quarantine measured were enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation may have conditioned the perception of young people's skills and the support they received. Second, the sample size was small, which is common in qualitative studies. While a small sample size may provide a more refined understanding of the phenomenon of interest in a specific context, generalizing the results to a wider context is difficult. Third, data collection was conducted online, which may influence the sincerity of the responses and experience of discussions within the focus groups. Nonetheless, this study has the strength of collecting qualitative data from a heterogeneous sample from several universities across different Spanish regions.

4.2. Practical Implications. Intuitively, the DAs model can be used to guide interventions aimed at promoting PYD and social contribution. For instance, promoting greater accessibility to quality community services, such as constructive extracurricular and leisure activities, can foster DAs satisfaction [6]. Furthermore, both universities and neighborhoods should facilitate volunteering programs or cultural activities (e.g., theater or music), which may provide opportunities for young people to work together while being mentored by responsible adults. These programs may also help individuals to find opportunities to contribute to others according to their own preferences. Research has shown that such activities effectively promote PYD and prevent risky behaviors [11, 22]. Moreover, these activities can foster a greater perception of social support and empowerment because the youths receive assistance from other adults and can actively contribute to their communities.

Next, the academic coursework can be reformulated, with tasks more oriented towards social contribution. Thus, students can put their knowledge and skills into practice by participating in social contribution activities. In this regard, social policies to provide youths with opportunities to develop new interests and skills are highly recommended. Moreover, these opportunities can offer alternatives for the constructive use of leisure time. Policymakers should pay further attention to youth empowerment and social inclusion. Labor inclusion policies are particularly relevant in the Spanish context, especially given the high unemployment rates.

Finally, in professional practice, youth perceptions of their own needs, contextual barriers, and personal strengths should be considered when designing more effective PYD programs in educational institutions, such as universities

and high schools. Program design should begin by examining youths' voices regarding their own lives to provide a more proximal and useful service. Additionally, social and emotional skills programs may help the youth in achieving greater empowerment. Finally, the implementation of more participatory teaching practices can enhance academic engagement. In turn, this can improve academic performance and prosocial behavior [6, 39].

5. Conclusions

This qualitative study provided evidence on Spanish undergraduates' perceptions of internal and external DAs, social contribution, and the barriers they encountered in their positive development. Participants emphasized the role of positive identity; positive values; and the support they received from their families, peers, and universities. They also highlighted the importance of social contributions as a protective factor against psychological well-being and identified some barriers. Further qualitative research is required to guide professional practices in the design of asset-based programs to foster PYD and social contributions. Finally, public policies should consider and integrate youth perceptions and opinions to foster DAs in the university and community contexts.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Huelva on 10 January 2019 (UHU1259711) for studies involving humans.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions

D.G.-B. contributed to the conceptualization. A.J.G. and C.M.-G. contributed to the methodology. D.G.-B. and A.-D.M.-B. were responsible for the validation. A.J.G., E.M.-M., and M.P.-G. carried out formal analysis. E.M.-M. and M.P.-G. contributed to the investigation. D.G.-B. provided the resources. A.J.G. and C.M.-G. were responsible for data curation. D.G.-B. and A.-D.M.-B. wrote the original draft preparation. D.G.-B. and A.-D.M.-B. wrote, reviewed, and edited the manuscript. D.G.-B. contributed to the supervision. D.G.-B. was responsible for the project administration. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript. All authors agree to publish this paper.

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