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Resources for a positive perception of work among poor working youth

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Abstract

Purpose – A positive perception of work helps counteract the stress and psychological loss because of non-optimal working conditions. This paper aims to hypothesize two pathways through which social-psychological resources in the workplace contribute to positive work perception: one pathway is direct and the other is through the mediating mechanism of youth's internal resource.

Design/methodology/approach – Filipino working youth from a government program for out-of-school poor youth, or working students enrolled in a free night high school, completed pertinent scales of the Multicontext Assessment Battery of Youth Development.

Findings – Co-workers' endorsement of work values and their joint exercise of resilience-building skills build youth's positive work perception. Youth's personal initiative contributes to their positive work perception by its direct influence and also by its mediating mechanism.

Research limitations/implications – The cross-sectional survey of this study does not allow for a definitive temporal progression from resources to positive work perception as does a longitudinal study.

Social implications – For poor working youth, the threats of a financially bleak future can be tempered by an attitude that recognizes work not only as financially necessary but also as beneficial to one's growth. The social-psychological resources in the workplace and the youth's emerging personal initiative jointly contribute to a positive perception of work.

Originality/value – The current research shifts the focus of analysis from disadvantageous employment conditions to the affective and motivational aspects of employment and uses the conservation-of-resources theory to plot the flow of resources from the workplace to the worker.

Keywords Work values, Resilience, The Philippines, Initiative, Working youth

Paper type Research paper

Resources for a positive perception of work, among poor working youth, the high poverty incidence in the Philippines, has led to an increasing number of underprivileged Filipinos who stop schooling to enter the workforce to augment their families' finances (World Health Organization, 2010). Aged 16 through 30, and involved mostly in agriculture, mining and manufacturing (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015), poor Filipino working youth typically enter the workforce with limited skills, education and

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training and, thus, are forced into temporary low-level and low-paying jobs. An estimated 2.3 million of them experience deplorable working conditions, receive insufficient compensation and lack social protection [see the International Labor Organization report of [Canlas and Pardalis \(2009\)](#) for a review].

Inadequate work conditions entail psychological costs that hinder poor young people from functioning optimally in the workplace ([Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000](#); [Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer, 2006](#)). It is nevertheless conceivable that these youths acquire desired work behaviors, as suggested by documentations of benefits derived by socially disadvantaged youth from the structured activities provided to them by organizations ([Entwisle et al., 2000](#); [Greenberger and Steinberg, 1981](#)). For example, youth engagement in work has been shown to lead to interpersonal growth, a sense of social responsibility and a successful transition to adulthood ([Hansen et al., 2003](#)). For poor youth who have left school, the workplace replaces the school as the primary venue for learning and education and what would further promote their development would be an effective integration in the workplace ([Maguire and Thompson, 2007](#)).

It is likely, however, that youth's integration in the workplace can be effective only if the youth acquires a positive perception of the demands of work, recognizing, for example, how work makes one more mature ([Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer, 2006](#)), that one's contributions to the workplace is of value ([Yabut et al., 2009](#)) or that work well done redounds to the satisfaction of one's co-workers ([Greenberger and Steinberg, 1981](#)). Clearly distinct from actual job skills or competencies, a positive work perception refers to favorable feelings and attitudes toward one's work, including the willingness to work hard, a mature sense of responsibility and the desire to learn ([Loughlin and Barling, 2001](#); [Taylor, 2005](#)). In contrast, a negative perception of work is reflected in the reluctance to undertake work assignments, in unreasonable and inappropriate work behaviors and in difficulty adjusting to the work environment ([Smith and Comyn, 2004](#)).

The current study examines the workplace as a resource for building a proper work perception in poor working youth. This study's primary assertion is that the workplace is a resource in two respects: it is not only a resource for developing in youth a positive perception of work, it is also a resource for building youth's own capacity for developing such perception. In a word, the workplace is responsible for having youth acquire a favorable attitude toward work but, with the aid of the workplace, the youth themselves are responsible. This assertion is supported by empirical evidence that what contribute to youth development are the various so-called external assets or assets residing in a context or in an environment, as well as internal assets, or the qualities of the individual ([Benson, 2007](#); [Sharkey et al., 2008](#)). This assertion also is supported by an empirical finding of [Sharkey et al. \(2008\)](#) that internal assets rather than preexisting in youth, are built through external assets.

Given the pressing concern of poverty alleviation, it is logical that research on working youth from developing countries focus on employment issues that may place youth at a disadvantage, for example, issues of unemployment rates ([Gough et al., 2013](#)), minimum-wage employment ([O'Higgins, 2003](#)) and the conflicting demands of work and education ([Wyn and Dwyer, 2002](#)). Undeniably, it is primarily or even solely for financial reasons that poor youth, many of whom would otherwise prefer to stay in school, would join the workforce. Indeed, motives for working, such as career advancement, professional interests and job fulfillment, which a better prepared, more highly educated workforce may have, are not motives widely shared by a poor, young workforce ([Chaves](#)

et al., 2004). Many of the poor working youth, in fact, are faced with the predicament of spending considerable time in employment that neither pays well nor equips them with skills needed for a more prestigious and better-paying job (Flanagan *et al.*, 2007). The question thus is where would poor youth draw the resource to enable them to advance in both employment and in life?

In the current study, we extend the understanding of poor youth's employment by examining the workplace not only as a financial resource or as a training-educational resource but also as a social-psychological resource that sustains youth's work engagement. With the workplace as a potential social-psychological resource, the threats of a financially bleak future can at the very least be tempered by an attitude that recognizes work not only as financially necessary but also as beneficial to one's growth and development. At best, such an attitude, along with the youth's inner resource that may emerge from the workplace's social-psychological resources, can be the bootstrap, so to speak, with which poor working youth can pull themselves up.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Used as the theoretical basis of the current study, the COR theory examines how individuals protect, recover or gain the resources necessary for one's functioning and well-being (Hobfoll, 1989). Not confined to the material, the resources considered by the COR theory include individuals' social relations and their personal traits and skills (Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008). In the current study, the COR theory is used to conceptualize the social-psychological resource that is the workplace and the youth's own internal resource.

According to the COR theory, resource loss is a primary motivational force, greater in fact than an anticipated resource gain. In other words, in the face of or threat of resource loss, a person's first response is to recapture the loss or to prevent further losses because such losses would place the person at greater risk or disadvantage (Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008). In the current study, we assume that poor working youth counteract the stress and the psychological loss that arise from situations of socioeconomic disadvantage, lack of job security and discontinued or delayed schooling and the youth do so by bettering their perception of work that, given the circumstances, would otherwise have been negative. Despite a low-level and low-paying job, for example, the youth may find value in it (e.g. an opportunity for personal growth) and may even enjoy the social relations in the workplace (Loughlin and Barling, 2001). Thus, acquiring a positive perception of work is a resource-loss prevention strategy – through it, poor working youth lessen the chances of losing their jobs because of less optimal performance or of quitting their jobs due to disinterest. Positive work perception, however, is in itself a resource in that it leads to optimal job performance and satisfaction (Taylor, 2005).

Given the assumption that a positive perception of work is necessary for survival and well-being in the workplace, the focus of inquiry of the current paper is how poor working youth acquire it. This paper examines two hypotheses, which are elaborated in the next section: first, the youth develop positive work perception by drawing from the workplace the pertinent resources. This is consistent with the COR principle that individuals invest resources to sustain the resource gain process (Hobfoll, 2001) and with the COR corollary that if individuals do not have the resources to invest, they draw the accessible resources from their environment (Halbesleben, 2006). Second, we

propose that these workplace resources also develop in youth the inner resource so that by themselves they are able to perceive work positively. This is consistent with the COR principle that one's acquired resources serve to strengthen one's capacity to counteract threats to resource loss (Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008).

Work values and resilience-building skills as workplace resources

One workplace resource that possibly contributes to youth's positive work perception is their co-workers' endorsement of work values, such as responsibility, professionalism and punctuality (Billett, 2004; Baciú, 2013). Such endorsement provides youth with the standards and guide for performing their work (Ros *et al.*, 1999), enabling them to efficiently deal with difficulties at work (Jocano, 2000; Lantz and Andersson, 2009). In the face of the pressing need to augment the family income, the affirmation that poor working youth receive from co-workers of the material and personal benefits of work (something central to the Filipino work value system; Jocano, 2000) would prod them to work with the proper perception (Yabut *et al.*, 2009).

A second workplace resource is the workers' collective exercise of resilience-building skills or the skills needed for overcoming obstacles and challenges in the workplace (Chaves *et al.*, 2004; Youssef and Luthans, 2007), including the skills for harnessing each other's capacity for solving problems at work (Larson and Hansen, 2005). By witnessing and participating in these collective efforts, youth become much more involved in their job responsibilities (Youssef and Luthans, 2007), and, when setbacks appear to compromise the performance of their duties, they monitor their perception of the work situation (Luthans *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, with the workplace harmony and job satisfaction that typically accompany the collective exercise of resilience-building skills, youth's perception of their work is likely to improve (DeLuca *et al.*, 2010).

Placing the above considerations against the backdrop of the COR theory, it can be argued that the endorsement in the workplace of work values and the collective exercise in the workplace of resilience-building skills are resources that the youth can draw on in order to lessen the threats of resource loss, positive perception of work, without which it would be difficult for them to counteract the stress of work. Thus, the following are hypothesized:

- H1. The endorsement of work values in the workplace is associated with poor working youth's positive perception of work.
- H2. The collective exercise of resilience-building skills in the workplace is associated with poor working youth's positive perception of work.

Personal initiative as an inner resource

Examining the contributions of workplace resources to youth development goes hand-in-hand with examining the contributions of youth's internal resources, that is, their qualities and strengths (Benson, 2007; Larson, 2000). The youth are regarded as co-producers, in a manner of speaking, of their developmental outcomes and they do so by determining their actions in environments (Benson, 2007). Thus, the active role that youth should play in their development in the workplace cannot be discounted. For example, just how highly working youth will uphold the work values endorsed in the workplace and just how much they will participate in resilience-building efforts of their co-workers are both markers of their initiative that will determine how extensively they

will work with a positive perception (cf. Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010; Smola and Sutton, 2002).

While co-workers' values and resilience help socialize youth in the proper conduct of work, personal initiative enables them to self-start and be persistent in their jobs. Personal initiative, or the ability to motivate oneself to persevere in a task for long, acting on one's plans and sustaining them, has been shown to determine youth's behaviors and outcomes in several contexts (Larson, 2000), for example, in leadership and goal achievement (Larson *et al.* 2005). Young people with initiative apply themselves to the tasks at hand – they are intrinsically motivated to work on complex or difficult tasks, regarding these tasks as not something imposed from without but rather as volitionally self-imposed; they continue to search for and devise ways to better their task performance, being urged on by the long-term benefits of persevering in the tasks at hand (Larson, 2000).

Situating the construct of personal initiative against the backdrop of the COR theory, it can be similarly argued that poor working youth's personal initiative is a resource that the youth can draw on. Thus, the following are hypothesized:

H3. Poor working youth's personal initiative is associated with their positive perception of work.

Youth's initiative is also possibly an outcome of workplace resources, especially among the young whose internal qualities still are emerging. Although initiative is a general, stable trait that is manifested across contexts (Benson, 2007; Larson, 2000), it is developed in contexts that have the requisite resources and it is in such contexts that it can first bring about positive outcomes. In the light of the hypothesized association of personal initiative to positive work perception (*H3*), personal initiative can also be tested as providing the mediating mechanism through which values and resilience resources lead to positive work perception. Thus, the following are hypothesized:

H4a. The endorsement of work values in the workplace is associated with poor working youth's initiative.

In the light of *H3* and *H4a*, it is proposed that:

H4b. Poor working youth's initiative provides the mediating mechanism through which endorsement of work values in the workplace becomes associated with a positive perception of work.

Analogous to *H4a* and *H4b* are the following hypotheses:

H5a. The collective exercise of resilience-building skills in the workplace is associated with poor working youth's initiative.

H5b. Poor working youth's initiative provides the mediating mechanism through which the collective exercise of resilience-building skills becomes associated with a positive perception of work.

Method

Participants

The present study utilized a subset of the working youth data set of the Youth Development Research Project of the De La Salle University Department of Psychology (De La Salle University Department of Psychology, 2012). Only data from participants

who responded to at least 50 per cent of the items in each of the measures included in the study were included in the current study. With this criterion, data from 147 of the 221 (67 per cent) working youth participants were utilized.

Of the 147 participants, 58 per cent were females. The ages ranged from 14 to 25 ($M = 18.10$, $SD = 1.70$). A total of 103 (70 per cent) participants were out-of-school youth who were involved in the Manila City government's work programs for poor youth. Participants were employed either in the various departments of the Manila City government performing clerical or community leadership functions or in service or retail industries that have partnerships with the city government. The remaining 44 participants were engaged in paid employment while pursuing free secondary education at the Br. Rafael Donato FSC Night High School of the De La Salle Santiago Zobel School. Students in the Night High School are underprivileged youth who may afterwards continue schooling at the Br. Rafael Donato FSC Technical-Vocational School.

However, 41 per cent of the participants worked for government; 39 per cent were engaged in manual labor, either in the agriculture or service sectors; and 20 per cent worked as office workers in private companies. Although 84 per cent of the participants had part-time status, on the average, they worked for 8.22 hours per day ($SD = 2.88$). Their daily compensation ranges from ₱ 50 (US\$1.12) to ₱ 800.00 (US\$17.95).

Measures

Measures were obtained from the multicontext assessment battery of youth development (MAB-YD; Reyes *et al.*, 2011). Both English and Filipino versions of the items were included in the questionnaire with the Filipino version italicized and typed below the English version. The scales' descriptions below were based on the MAB-YD revised user's manual (Reyes *et al.*, 2016). The scales' psychometric properties shown below were from the MAB-YD manual, namely:

- the Cronbach's alpha (the first was computed from the Phase 1 data-gathering for scales development; the second was computed from the Phase 2 data-gathering); and
- the statistics from the exploratory factor analyses (computed from the Phase 1 data-gathering).

Workplace endorsement of work values was measured using the workplace-endorsed work values scale, which asks how important to the people in the workplace are the indicated work values, including the benefits of work, work ethics and standards and professional and collegial dealings. The scale has 13 items with a five-point Likert-type scale response format (1: *not at all important* to 5: *very important*). Cronbach's alpha = 0.92; 0.95. Exploratory factory analysis indicated a one-factor solution with 53 per cent of the variance explained.

Workplace exercise of resilience-building skills was measured using the workplace resilience-building skills scale, which pertains to group skills that foster resilience, that is, the collective capacity of workers to overcome challenges and setbacks, such as clear delegation of roles and tasks and efforts toward group harmony. The scale has five items with a five-point Likert-type scale response format (1: *not at all true* to 5: *very true*). Cronbach's alpha = 0.79; 0.85.

Exploratory factor analysis indicated a one-factor solution with 54 per cent of the variance explained. *Personal Initiative* was measured using the Initiative scale, which is a self-assessment of one's ability to take on responsibility for accomplishing a goal and for staying committed to its accomplishment. The scale has ten items with a five-point Likert-type scale response format (1: *not at all true* to 5: *very true*). Cronbach's alpha = 0.87; 0.84. Exploratory factor analysis indicated a one factor solution with 46 per cent of the variance explained.

Work perception was measured using the perception of roles and tasks in the workplace scale, which is a self-assessment of awareness, acceptance and appreciation of one's roles and tasks in the workplace, including the benefits that one and others derive from one's enacting these roles and tasks. The scale has six items with a five-point Likert-type scale response format (1: *not at all true* to 5: *very true*). Cronbach's alpha = 0.82; 0.89. Exploratory factor analysis indicated a one-factor solution with 53 per cent of the variance explained.

Procedure

Administrators of the Youth Desk of the Manila City government and of the De La Salle Santiago Zobel School granted permission to administer the MAB-YD to participants.

Participants signed an informed consent form after having been informed of the objectives of the larger Youth Development research project and after having been assured of the voluntary nature of their participation and of the confidentiality with which their responses would be treated.

Participants then answered the MAB-YD instrument on hard copies. Surveys were returned directly to a member of the research team. The completed surveys and the software-entered data were appropriately secured and archived.

Results

Shown in Table I are the means, standard deviations and pairwise correlation coefficients between each pair of variables. Gender was not included in the statistical analyses as preliminary analysis showed no significant gender difference in work perception.

Using Preacher and Hayes' (2004) Process Macro for the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences®, mediation models were run with personal initiative as the hypothesized mediator. In each model, the independent variable was allowed to influence both the hypothesized mediator and the dependent variable; the hypothesized mediator was allowed to influence the dependent variable.

Two mediation models were run with work perception as the dependent variable, one model for workplace endorsement of work values and one model for workplace exercise

Study variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
Workplace endorsement of work values	4.25	0.52	–			
Workplace exercise of resilience-building skills	3.89	0.57	0.46*	–		
Personal initiative	3.95	0.49	0.51*	0.38*	–	
Work perception	4.06	0.51	0.63*	0.50*	0.57*	–

Note: * $p < 0.05$

Table I.
Descriptive statistics
and intercorrelations
among the variables
in the study

of resilience-building skills. Figure 1 shows the combined mediation models including the resulting standardized path coefficient.

H1, *H2* and *H3* proposed that work perception would have direct positive relationships with workplace endorsement of work values (*H1*), workplace exercise of resilience building skills (*H2*) and personal initiative (*H3*). All these hypotheses were supported.

H4a and *H5a* proposed that workplace endorsement of work values (*H4a*) and workplace exercise of resilience-building skills (*H5a*) would have direct positive relationships with personal initiative. Both these hypotheses were supported.

H4b and *H5b* proposed that personal initiative would mediate the relationship of work perception to work values (*H4b*) and resilience-building skills (*H5b*). As mentioned above, both work values and resilience-building skills have been shown to be positively associated with personal initiative; in turn, personal initiative have been shown to be positively associated with work perception.

The total effect of work values on work perception remained significant even when personal initiative was added in the model, suggesting that personal initiative partially mediated the effect of work values on work perception (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). Likewise, the total effect of resilience-building skills on work perception remained significant even when personal initiative was added in the model, suggesting that personal initiative partially mediated the effect of resilience-building skills on work perception.

Significant mediation effects were determined by the 95 per cent bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals based on bootstrap samples of 5,000. The estimated indirect effect of work values on work perception through the mediation of personal initiative is 0.10 ($SE = 0.04$), $BCa \times 95$ per cent CI (0.03, 0.20); in contrast, the direct effect is 0.33 ($SE = 0.07$). The estimated indirect effect of resilience-building skills on work perception through the mediation of personal initiative is 0.04 ($SE = 0.02$), $BCa \times 95$ per cent CI (0.00, 0.10); in contrast, the direct effect is 0.17 ($SE = 0.06$).

Discussion

The current research is founded on the premise that acquiring a positive perception of work would help counteract the stress and psychological loss because of non-optimal working conditions (e.g. low-level or low-paying job, lack of job security). Given this premise, the current study aims to establish the external and internal resources through which poor working youth can develop a positive perception of work.

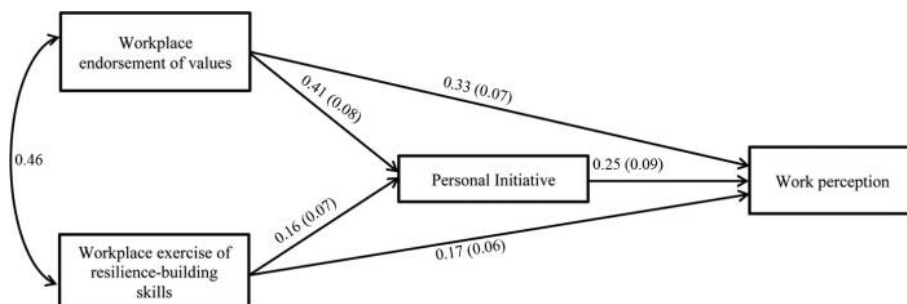


Figure 1.
Mediation models
with standardized
path coefficients
(standard error)

This study's mediation models suggest that to develop positive work perception, poor working youth draw on their experiences of co-workers' valuing the benefits and standards of work and of their co-workers' collective and strategic actions to overcome problems at work; they also draw on their initiative in pursuing goals and in being responsible and committed to them. These mediation models further show that the values and resilience resources in the workplace directly bear on youth's personal initiative; thus, personal initiative provides a pathway through which the values and resilience resources in the workplace bring about poor working youth's positive work perception.

External and internal resources for working youth development

The current research provides insights on how external and internal resources bring about youth development in circumstances of socioeconomic disadvantage and suboptimal employment.

First, the results of the current research exemplify the utility of shifting the focus of analysis from the socioeconomically disadvantageous employment conditions of poor youth (e.g. job shortages, low wages, harsh working conditions) to the affective and motivational aspects of employment that may provide the youth with some advantage. From this vantage point, youth can utilize the social-psychological resources in the workplace, as well as their personal initiative, to work their way towards advancement. Indeed, despite poor youth's low-status and low-paying employment, their workplaces can still provide the enabling context for socializing youth into meaningful work engagement and even into desired professional responsibilities and outlooks. In particular, the current research shows that a positive work perception is not only a resource to be invested to combat the stress and the psychological costs of poor youth's work but also a resource to be invested toward professional advancement.

Second, the current research shows the utility of the COR framework (Hobfoll, 1989) in specifying resource mechanisms or processes that would lead to positive youth development. The results of the current study exemplify the interplay of workplace social relations and the young person's emergent qualities in creating the valued resource of positive work perception amidst socioeconomic disadvantage and suboptimal employment. For a workplace to be "worker-enabling", there should be an efficient flow of social-psychological resources from the external to the internal, that is, from the workplace to the worker; such flow would provide the pathways toward youth's favorable perception of their current employment and, possibly, of their future employment as well. Moreover, situating positive youth development research in the COR framework readily reveals the diversity of the types and nature of resources. Actual job instruction, supervision or apprenticeship (Billett, 2004; Larson *et al.*, 2005) are clearly workplace resources for youth. In youth employment, however, that is contracted not primarily for professional development but because of financial need, these job-specific training resources are possibly not what poor working youth immediately need or readily acknowledge (or these resources may not even be adequate or accessible); rather, another type of resource, social-psychological in nature provides the first layer of resource for poor working youth.

Third, in establishing the mediating role of the internal resource of personal initiative, the current research affirms the tenet of positive youth development that the youth are the primary movers of their own development (Lerner, 2006). While studies on

positive youth development have provided evidence for the joint contributions of external and internal assets (i.e. resources) on youth's learning and development (Benson, 2007) to our knowledge there is not much evidence showing that, indeed, internal resources, as outcomes of external resources, provide the mediating mechanism through which external resources additionally lead to positive outcomes. The active role that youth should play in their development and learning cannot therefore be discounted.

Personal initiative, however, also is an outcome of workplace socialization, especially among working youth whose internal qualities still are emerging and developing. The results of the current study suggest that, although personal initiative is a general, stable trait that is manifested across contexts and situations (Larson, 2000; Benson, 2007), it is developed in contexts with the requisite external resources and it is in such contexts that it can first bring about positive outcomes. Workplace socialization thus has far-reaching consequences that go beyond the confines of work. While the cross-sectional data-gathering for this study renders its conclusions about the development of personal initiative tentative, the study presents a concrete model for testing with cross-lagged panel or other longitudinal designs.

The current research has implications for practitioners and policymakers engaged in youth development. Employment supports the youth as they transition into adult professional roles. Being socialized by their older, more experienced co-workers who largely determine the prevailing culture of work in the workplace, working youth exert the initiative to internalize the external resources and to exhibit the proper perception of work. Early work experience and training will enable youth to acquire a positive work orientation, a resource that can be both developed and invested as working youth enact more complex work roles in, hopefully, still nurturing workplaces.

Toward positive development of poor working youth

In summary, the current research thus makes the claim that employment is an avenue for poor youth to learn to thrive despite socioeconomic impediments. Given adequate resources in the workplace, poor working youth have the inherent or developing internal resources for perceiving work favorably despite its backdrop of socioeconomic disadvantage. The perception that poor youth acquire and exhibit at work is itself a resource. The youth thus do not only benefit from the workplace, they also bear the responsibility of enriching the flow of assets (i.e. resources) in the workplace (Benson, 2007). Youth's contributions to workplace resources may even transfer to future work and other engagements such that the expected long-term developmental outcome is for poor working youth to improve their living conditions and to become active agents in shaping work and society.

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