

A Qualitative Exploration of Adolescents' Commitment to Athletics and the Arts

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This study sought to enhance, through qualitative methods, an understanding of the factors that influence adolescents' commitments to extracurricular activities over time. We obtained semistructured interview data from 41 adolescents who had been highly involved in athletics or the arts since middle childhood. We examined their interpretations of the factors that supported or hindered their continued involvement in these activities over the years. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that psychological factors, perceptions of the context, and emerging identity all played a role in decisions to remain involved or quit. Perceived competence and peer relationships emerged as important psychological factors, whereas perceptions of challenge and costs and benefits were important contextual influences. We discuss implications of the findings for the implementation of extracurricular programs that support adolescent development.

There has been a tendency in the developmental literature to focus on adolescence as a period of risk and negative outcomes rather than considering aspects of positive development. This is evident in the growing interest in

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developmental psychopathology and the numerous programs aimed at curbing youth problem behaviors. To fill the void in the literature, researchers have highlighted the need to study contexts that promote positive youth development (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Larson, 2000; Sherrod, 1997). Moreover, both researchers and policy makers have highlighted the critical importance of understanding how youth spend out-of-school time (Quinn, 1999).

Extracurricular activities are one context that may provide developmental benefits for adolescents. Participation in organized activities has the potential to (a) limit the time adolescents can become involved in risky activities, (b) teach adolescents values and competencies, and (c) help to situate adolescents within a peer group and enhance the opportunity to establish positive social networks (Carnegie Council, 1992). Moreover, it is important to study these structured activities because they are such an integral part of the secondary school experience for many students. Therefore, in this study, we explore adolescents' accounts of their involvement in activities such as sports, music, and drama to provide a more complete picture of development. What do adolescents perceive that motivates them to continue? What leads them to quit? What are the developmental implications of these decisions?

Several scholars have documented a general decline in organized activity participation during adolescence (Bamberger, 1982; Gould, 1987; Hustman, 1992). The disengagement of youth from athletics and the arts, especially among those individuals who have exhibited high degrees of talent as children, has been the subject of much concern (Bamberger, 1982; Czikszenmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Eccles & Alfeld-Liro, in press; Getzels & Czikszenmihalyi, 1976). Although attention has focused on understanding this dropout phenomenon, many adolescents do remain involved and/or increase their involvement in organized activities during this period. For example, Mahoney and Cairns (1997) documented low levels of extracurricular participation in middle school with dramatic increases in participation during high school. One reason for this difference in findings may be developmental: Mahoney and Cairns (1997) examined changes from middle school to high school whereas other studies have focused on declines over a longer period: from elementary to high school. It is important to understand when changes in participation take place and what motivates these decreases, especially when considering the potential benefits of involvement.

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As a way of identifying relevant frameworks to study the question of what motivates adolescent participation in extracurricular activities, we reviewed the existing literature in the fields of leisure studies, developmental psychology, sociology, education, and public policy. Before outlining some of the key findings in this literature, it is important to note some of the methodological and conceptual limitations of this previous research. In general, researchers have used cross-sectional quantitative measures to compare participants' and nonparticipants' scores on academic and psychological measures rather than considering the *process* by which extracurricular participation enhances or impedes desirable outcomes (Brown, 1988). Although it is important to examine the consequences of extracurricular participation, it is also critical to conduct process-oriented research that considers how and why individuals choose to participate in activities or not. Another limitation is that the majority of studies have been confined to the sports domain (Holland & Andre, 1987), with only limited information on participation in music and the arts. Because adolescents are involved in a variety of extracurricular activities, it is important to investigate both the commonality and the variability in adolescents' experiences across a wider range of activities.

In general, researchers have reported positive consequences of participation in extracurricular activities. Several studies have documented links between participation and higher grades, greater self-esteem, higher educational aspirations, and higher rates of college enrollment (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Hanks & Eckland, 1978; Holland & Andre, 1987; Kirshnit, Ham, & Richards, 1989; Otto & Alwin, 1977). Participation in these activities can also foster positive social relationships with peers and significant adults as well as help to integrate students into the school community (Larson, 1994; Patrick, Ryan, Alfred-Liro, Fredricks, Hruda, & Eccles, 1999). Furthermore, Larson (2000) argues that participation in structured leisure activities, such as athletics and the arts, can help adolescents develop initiative and the capacity for agency.

Extracurricular participation can also protect adolescents from engaging in risky behaviors. For example, engagement in extracurricular activities has been associated with lower chances of dropping out of school, especially among high-risk youth (Mahoney & Cairnes, 1997; McNeal, 1995), and has been related to lower involvement in delinquent and risky behaviors (Holland & Andre, 1987; Landers & Landers, 1978). It has been hypothesized that these activities can provide a gateway into conventional social networks and limit opportunities to engage in problematic behaviors, although there is little research that has tested these effects (Carnegie Council, 1992).

In contrast to these positive associations, other scholars have argued that participation can have negative consequences. For example, Coleman (1961)

argued that the values encouraged in extracurricular activities, and in particular athletics, are in opposition to academic pursuits. Specifically, Coleman argues that an adolescent society that emphasizes peer acceptance, social status, and indifference to academic achievement is highlighted in these types of activities and that these values negatively influence adolescents' academic performance. A zero sum model of time involvement has also been proposed to explain possible negative consequences of participation. The assumption of this model is that greater participation in extracurricular activities can have a negative influence on academics because time spent in these activities takes away from time that can be spent on schoolwork (Marsh, 1992; Steinberg, 1996). In addition, sports involvement has been linked to increased rates of school deviance (Lamborn, Brown, Mounts, & Steinberg, 1992) and to higher levels of drinking alcohol (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Given the mixed perspectives in the literature regarding possible negative ramifications of participation, it is important to examine how both positive and negative experiences play into adolescents' decisions about their level of extracurricular involvement.

Although the existing literature has identified several consequences of extracurricular participation, researchers have neglected the question of why individual students join extracurricular activities and maintain their participation over time (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). Research on motivation, particularly achievement motivation, provides some insight into the question of why adolescents choose to participate in extracurricular activities. In general, researchers have implied that motivation is an intra-individual process focused on the needs, attitudes, goals, expectancies, and values that a person brings to the situation (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Less attention has been devoted to how external factors, such as characteristics of the classroom and school context, influence motivation (Ames, 1992; Maehr & Midgley, 1996). One of the critical missing links in both the motivation and the extracurricular literature is work on how the context interacts with individual factors to influence persistence and withdrawal behavior. That is, how do adolescents think about and evaluate their participation, given the situation in which participation occurs.

Our aim in this study was to delineate the relevant factors and processes that influence adolescents' commitment to extracurricular activities. We chose to use a qualitative approach to accomplish this aim because we believed it would provide us with a vivid, in-depth, and full description of the process involved in adolescents' decision making (Fielding & Fielding, 1986; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Moreover, a qualitative method allowed us to explore how adolescents themselves construct the meaning of participation rather than using previously derived objective categories that may not

reflect each individuals' subjective views. We felt it was important to investigate the subjective perceptions because they are most influential in an adolescent's decision to remain involved in the activity. This approach also allowed us to remain open to discovering relationships, concepts, and ideas that had not been considered prior to collecting data (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1992). Finally, a qualitative methodology is particularly useful when the goal is to contribute to generating hypotheses in an understudied domain (Patton, 1990), as is the case here.

METHOD

Participants

This study is part of a larger ($N = 873$), longitudinal survey project (Childhood and Beyond Study) about academic and extracurricular activity choice in childhood and adolescence conducted by Jacquelynne Eccles and her colleagues at the University of Michigan. Participants in the current study were 41 adolescents (15 males, 26 females) in Grades 9 ($n = 12$), 10 ($n = 14$), and 12 ($n = 15$).¹ The adolescents were all European American and came from three middle-class socioeconomic communities in a major Midwest metropolitan area.

Because we were interested in exploring factors that support involvement in extracurricular activities, we selected a purposive sample of the most highly involved and competent individuals in childhood to interview about their decisions when they reached adolescence. This sampling procedure is in accordance with Patton's (1990) recommendation for qualitative researchers purposefully to select cases at the extremes of a distribution because they are more likely to contain rich information. Moreover, other scholars have suggested this sampling procedure when examining understudied populations (e.g., Vaillant, 1977). Although children at the high ends of the distribution may be unique, we believe that it is among such samples that issues of choice and decision making are best highlighted.

We used a number of indicators to identify cases from the high end of the distributions of competence and involvement from the larger longitudinal study. First, we used survey data collected in 1989 and 1990 (when the participants were in elementary school) to create composite measures of competency, value, and ability, which we then used to identify participants who were perceived (by themselves and by parents and teachers) as being highly competent (7 on a 7-point scale) in at least one nonacademic activity, who

valued engagement in that activity very highly (7 on a 7-point scale), and who spent considerable time (by self report or parental report) involved in that activity (more than 5 hours per week in music or more than 7 hours per week in sports).

Of these participants, we then identified those who had maintained their high levels of competence, value, and involvement into adolescence by examining information obtained both through telephone interviews with parents and survey data collected from the students in 1994 and 1995. We also identified those who had been highly involved in middle childhood but who had just recently quit their activity so that we could interview them about their decision.

From this initial identification procedure, 65 adolescents were selected. Six adolescents were excluded because they had moved out of the geographic region. Of the remaining 59 adolescents, 50 agreed to participate. An additional 8 families were not interviewed because a mutually agreeable time could not be found within the research time frame. Furthermore, one interview was excluded from analysis because of technical difficulties, leaving a final sample of 41 participating families.

All of these adolescents were involved in or had recently quit participating in one or more of the following activities: sports, instrumental music, singing, drama, dance, or art. In this sample, 24 adolescents were involved in a single activity, and 17 pursued more than one activity (e.g., choir and softball). There were 26 adolescents who pursued sports (football, soccer, baseball, softball, basketball, swimming, and gymnastics); 12 were in instrumental music (e.g., piano, violin, guitar, trumpet); 9 adolescents sang in a choir; 6 were involved in dance; 5 adolescents were in drama; and 2 adolescents were in art (Note: numbers add to 60 rather than 41 because some participants were involved in multiple activities).

Interview Procedure

Each adolescent's family was initially contacted by phone and informed that the adolescent had been identified from his or her previously completed surveys as being one of the most highly involved in an activity. Parents were asked whether they and their child would agree to paid interviews about the adolescent's involvement and its effect on the family.² One parent (typically the mother)³ and the adolescent were interviewed individually during the Fall and Winter of 1995 and 1996.⁴ In this article, we discuss only the findings from the interviews conducted with the adolescents.

We chose to use a semistructured in-depth interview to prompt discussion about adolescents' involvement in their activity from childhood to adoles-

cence. The interview questions were organized around the following areas: (a) general changes in the adolescent's life over the past 3 to 4 years; (b) the adolescent's general hopes and plans for the future; (c) the adolescent's history of involvement and accomplishment in the activity; (d) hopes and concerns about the activity; (e) the impact of the activity on other aspects of life, such as school, peers, and the family; (f) the role of significant others such as family members, coaches or teachers, and peers on his/her involvement; and (g) hopes and plans for involvement in the future. If the adolescent was involved in multiple activities, the same set of questions was asked about each activity separately. Each interview was audiotaped and lasted from 1 to 1½ hours.

Each interview was conducted by one of five female researchers who had some theoretical background in development and motivation. The interviewers attended two training sessions given by experienced researchers in interviewing methods. The training sessions covered such issues as establishment of rapport, effective communication techniques, specific strategies for eliciting responses, and ethical issues. In addition, each interviewer piloted the protocol to determine whether the order of the interview, comprehension of questions, and probes were effective in eliciting the quality and depth of responses we were seeking. Modifications were made to the final protocol based on these pilot interviews.

Because our aim was to collect rich descriptive data that describes the diversity of adolescents' experience in extracurricular activities, we chose to use multiple interviewers. The decision to use several interviewers is common and desirable in qualitative research because multiple researchers can elicit a wider range of responses on a topic (Erickson & Stull, 1998). Although consistency and accuracy of information across findings are potential concerns with the use of multiple interviewers, it is important to note that reliability and validity cannot be defined in the same way in qualitative methods as contrasted to traditional quantitative paradigms (Lather, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merrick, 1999). We used several strategies suggested by qualitative researchers to increase reliability and reduce interviewer bias (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One strategy we used to increase reliability was peer briefing. The research team met several times prior to beginning the interviews to come to a consensus on the aims and objectives of the study. Furthermore, to ensure comparability across interviews and interviewers, we used a detailed interview protocol, which outlined specific issues that required attention. However, to fully explore the perspective of individual adolescents and keep with an inductive, qualitative approach, we also allowed participants' own answers to help guide the direction taken during individual interviews.

Data Analysis

We used a combination of induction, deduction, and verification techniques to analyze the interviews. The constant comparative method was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), in which we continually cycled through the data, making comparisons between the interview data and the derived categories, until we were certain that emerging ideas could be verified. We used several strategies to increase the validity of these findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For instance, we used peer debriefing to increase the likelihood that credible findings and interpretations would be produced. The research team met weekly or biweekly to discuss emerging themes and reach consensus. We also engaged in negative case analysis, which is a process of revisiting our ideas in light of what we were finding in our analysis.

The research team went through several steps of data analysis. In the first step, each interviewer listened to the audiotapes of the interviews she had conducted and wrote a structured summary of the main issues for each adolescent. In the second step, we exchanged these summaries and discussed common themes that were emerging from the interviews. In the third step, we developed a list of codes from these common themes and from the literature on development, motivation, and extracurricular participation. These codes were both data based and theory based, in that their construction was the result of an iterative process of trying to understand the adolescents' own words while also taking into account existing knowledge from research. Although we were careful to present the data in pure form, it was practical to use known terms from the literature when explaining our interpretations.

Using the themes we generated, we coded the interview transcripts with HyperResearch (Hesse-Biber, Kinder, Dupis, Dupis, & Tornabene, 1994), a computer software tool for coding qualitative data. Each transcript was coded by alternating teams of two researchers/interviewers.⁵ Discussions during the coding process resulted in minor refinements and elaborations of the coding framework. In the next step, we examined printed reports of the codes generated by HyperResearch, looking for commonalities and differences among the adolescents. Because we were interested in how the individuals made decisions about their level of involvement, we focused on passages that had been coded for motivation, costs and benefits, future expectations, characteristics of classes and teams, and changes in level of involvement. Each researcher wrote a summary of the common themes that emerged for one of these codes and noted which cases did not correspond to this theme and why.

These summaries and reports were then exchanged with another team member to verify the conclusions. The research team subsequently met on several occasions to reach consensus on emerging themes and how they

seemed to fit together. As a team, we also developed a working model, or interpretive framework, of the processes we were identifying in the data. This framework was continually refined as we met during the course of our analysis. The first two authors wrote a draft of the manuscript and distributed it among the others for comments and edits. The entire team met on several more occasions to discuss each new revision until we were satisfied that the manuscript was an accurate presentation of the data and our common interpretations. In the following section, we present adolescents' reports of their decisions about continued participation, followed by our interpretation of how the themes fit together, both within and across interviews.

RESULTS

Overall, it appeared that the beginning of high school was a major turning point in these adolescents' commitments to their extracurricular activities. Although participants had been fairly comparable in their level of activity involvement during late childhood, differing trajectories of involvement emerged by adolescence. Of our sample of 41 adolescents in 60 different activities, 12 adolescents (in 15 activities) ceased their involvement during high school. Of the remaining 29 adolescents (in 45 activities) who planned to continue their involvement throughout high school, 9 individuals (in 10 activities) did not think they would continue their activity in any form after graduation, whereas 11 (in 35 activities) planned to continue their activity as a hobby in adulthood.

Why did each individual make the decision he or she did? To answer this question, we focus on adolescents' reports of both their current and future involvement. In this article, we highlight the individual processes that influence participation decisions, with less attention to social processes. A more thorough description of how socializers such as peers, parents, and teachers influence these adolescents' commitment is described in detail elsewhere (see Alfeld-Liro, Fredricks, Hruda, Patrick, & Ryan, 1998; Patrick et al., 1999).

In this section, we present the most frequently mentioned themes regarding adolescents' decisions about their participation in extracurricular activities, accompanied by illustrative quotes from participants. We include frequency counts of themes when applicable. Because the 41 adolescents were involved in 60 activities, we provide frequency counts of activities (not adolescents, except where otherwise noted) in which the theme was mentioned at least once by an adolescent.

We have organized the presentation of themes into three main sections. First, we discuss adolescents' reports of the psychological (individual) factors that influenced their participation decisions. Next, we discuss the themes that emerged concerning adolescents' perceptions of the opportunities provided by the context. Third, we discuss the way that adolescents' emerging sense of self meshed (or did not mesh) with their participation in the activity. Although we outline the psychological, contextual, and identity components in separate sections, we acknowledge that many of the factors within them are reciprocally related. At the conclusion of the results section, we integrate these themes into a comprehensive interpretative framework of the decision-making process about continued participation from a developmental perspective.

Although we focus on decisions about whether to stay or leave an activity, it is important to note that individuals were continually engaged in reevaluation of their participation. Adolescents were frequently confronted with situations where they had to make choices about their type of involvement. Examples of some situations adolescents encountered included (a) needing to make a decision about changing coaches or switching teams when they moved to higher levels; (b) needing to make a decision if they would try out for the high school team, join a community team, or do both; and (c) needing to decide on their time commitment when they faced competing demands from school, work, friends, and family. This was particularly true with in-school activities, where the cycle of the seasons, semesters, and school years required periodic reaffirmations of the commitment to participate. An adolescent's ultimate decision about whether to continue participation unfolded over time as the result of this series of evaluations.

Psychological Factors

In this section, we describe the psychological (individual) factors that we found to contribute to the decision-making process over time. Specifically, we focus on the individual variables that explain why some adolescents persist over time and why others discontinue their involvement during this developmental stage.

Enjoyment was the most common reason why adolescents reported participating in an activity. Many reported a significant amount of positive affect toward their activity and described feelings of pleasure and fun. When we probed further about what made the activity fun, the two most frequently cited reasons were being good at it and having the opportunity to see friends. First, we discuss the themes around the adolescents' belief in the importance

of being good at the activity, which fits into the notion of competence outlined in the motivational literature. Next, we discuss the themes concerning adolescents' reports of the importance of their friends to their activity, which fits with the notions of peer relations outlined in the social development literature. Within these categories, we will discuss the complexity of adolescents' thinking about both competence and social relations.

"Because I Am Good At It"

Adolescents' perceptions of being good at their activity seemed to motivate them to keep investing effort over time. They were willing to stick with the activity because they perceived they had the ability. For example,

What do you like about it and why is it fun?

I think you know, because like I have a skill for it. . . . It is something that I go out there and I enjoy doing. You know, because I am good at it. I think if I weren't as good I probably would not have stuck with it so long. I probably would have dropped it last year or a couple of years ago. (9th-grade male in basketball)

This appeared to have positive psychological consequences. For example, adolescents reported that finding something that they were good at increased their self-confidence. This emotional boost appeared to contribute to their ongoing participation in the domain, as illustrated by these two adolescents.

I loved it so much, and I think at that point it was just an escape for my life because my life is difficult, just the teasing I got, and I wasn't secure with myself. And being someone else was very wonderful and just the fact that I could do it well. So at that point I couldn't play sports, and I wasn't good at math and all that stuff. And I found something that I was really good at that I could do. (12th-grade female in drama)

Singing is something that means a lot to people, especially people like me. . . . Because it's . . . one of the few things I am really talented at. It's one of the few things that . . . I feel very positive about myself. (12th-grade female in singing)

This boost to confidence seemed to be especially important for individuals who had not been successful in either academic or social domains. Opportunities to experience success in an extracurricular activity may help make school a more positive experience for adolescents who have experienced disappointments in other domains.

Conversely, adolescents who did not feel that they had the necessary skill tended to lose interest in their activities over time. One female who quit said,

I was a pitcher, but I could never get my technique and I wasn't fast enough. We had another pitcher that's like really good. I knew that I wouldn't play. . . . And I knew that I would be sitting on the bench three days a week when everybody else would be playing a game. I would be just sitting on the bench keeping score or warming the bench. (12th-grade female who quit softball)

Each year, the activities became more competitive, with more individuals vying for fewer places. These adolescents who once felt they were "the top" in their activities found themselves competing with a more select group of individuals. Interestingly, although all of the participants in our study had been fairly comparable in perceived ability in childhood, by adolescence, five individuals (in seven activities) reported feeling that their skill level was inadequate to compete at the higher levels now required.

How did adolescents decide whether or not they were "good at it?" They seemed to use a variety of factors to determine whether they had the skills necessary to continue their activity. A major criterion was whether they received continued recognition for their skills from peers, family members, or teachers. For example, a 12th-grade male in choir said about his teacher,

[The choir teacher] was excited about what I was going to do in the future. And he thought I had a chance to be good. . . . He just said, "Yeah, you have a good voice. You know, I want you to stick with it." And then, from then on, I just stuck with it, because I got a boost of confidence. (12th-grade male in choir)

It appeared that receiving recognition from significant others strengthened adolescents' perception of their own abilities, which in turn helped to bolster their commitment to the domain.

Adolescents' perceptions of whether they were good at it were also influenced by receiving a special award, getting accepted to a special team or class, and experiencing the thrill of beating others. Receiving positive feedback seemed to validate their skills (especially for those at higher levels), strengthen their motivation to do their best, and enhance their enjoyment of the activity. Interestingly, receiving extrinsic rewards and recognition seemed to be reciprocally related to ability over time. Individuals who won awards got further recognition from teachers and peers, which helped to further increase the perceptions of their ability and thus increase their persistence and the likelihood of receiving more external incentives in the future.

In addition to outside incentives, most adolescents also discussed continuing their participation because of intrinsic motives, particularly wanting to improve their abilities ($n = 29$). These individuals reported spending considerable time and effort on their own trying to master their activity. This ongoing

ing desire for improvement helped to foster their continued interest in the domain.

I keep pushing myself to be better and better. And the better I am, the more I tend to like it. Probably, since I'm first chair, I'm better than seniors and everybody. That's pushed me a lot. Whenever I get a new CD or something, I'll try to figure that out. That keeps me busy with guitar, and makes me better. . . . Little things that keep pushing me. (9th-grade male in instrumental music)

These adolescents appeared to be motivated by the desire for personal improvement. For example, they reported taking extra lessons, going to special camps, and practicing by themselves with hopes of honing their skills. This desire for mastery seemed to strengthen both their motivation and their enjoyment over time.

"Because My Friends Are There"

In addition to being good at it, another important reason why adolescents participated in their activities was the opportunity to be with their friends or meet new friends ($n = 21$).

Why do you think you play the guitar? What are the main reasons?

Some of my friends started playing guitar. I really like it, too. That's probably why I started, though. Because my friends were. I thought it would be cool, and I really like it now. (9th-grade male in instrumental music)

Adolescents also reported that they decided to participate in their activity because it helped them to find a peer group that shared common values and interests. This appeared to contribute to the adolescents' perceptions of school belonging, which is an important issue because many of the adolescents attended large high schools where students are less likely to receive personalized attention.

So I was automatically drawn into it, because my friend, she's been extras for the plays and stuff. And there's like kind of an automatic thing that we just do it together. I mean, that group of people who does the drama club do the drama club activities. The kind of people that I want to be around. (10th-grade female in drama)

Hamilton Players Group⁶ at my school is like a family. Everybody is there for everybody. It's like a real close group. (12th-grade male in drama).

"Other Reasons Why I Participate"

In addition to the opportunity to be with their friends, several adolescents mentioned that they were involved to please other people in their lives, such as their parents and coaches ($n = 16$). The following quote by a 9th-grade female who quit ballet illustrates this theme:

I really liked it up until I was maybe 9 or 10. And then it just started to get tedious. It was like, "Well, time to go to ballet, let's go." I didn't really like it anymore and my mom was like "Well, if you quit you aren't going to be doing anything." . . . The main reason I just stayed with it is because I was afraid she would be like angry with me. And finally I think I quit when I was 13. I just could not take it anymore. I was, like "Mom, I hate it." (9th-grade female who quit ballet)

This focus on pleasing others appeared to stem from participants wanting to avoid letting peers in their activity down or wanting to fulfill their coach's, teacher's, or parents' expectations. Those adolescents who were participating more for others' sake than their own found themselves reevaluating this motivation when they reached adolescence and gained more autonomy. At this stage of defining their individuality, it became important not to participate just to please another person.

In addition to being good at it and wanting to be with friends or please others, adolescents outlined a variety of other, less common reasons for participating. For instance, some adolescents remained in their activity because they wanted to be involved in something that kept them busy and filled their free time ($n = 10$). Some believed it was currently useful or would be useful in either their future education or career ($n = 8$). Finally, several adolescents said they participated because it gave them an emotional outlet and a release from pressures they often felt in their school or in their family ($n = 15$).

Perceptions of Context

In addition to individual aspects, adolescents' perception of the context was another critical aspect of the decision-making process. Our conceptualization of context is influenced by ecological models where development is nested within multiple overlapping spheres of influence (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979). We believe that adolescents' experience in extracurricular activities (immediate context) is shaped by the larger cultural conditions in which they live, as well as by their experiences in other contexts such as the school, family, and peer group. In this section, we focus on adolescents' perceptions of the immediate context and how this experience is shaped by

their social class. The links between these activity contexts and other environments in which the adolescents live is beyond the scope of this article.

Larger Context: Community

This sample of adolescents lives in middle-class suburban communities that value and encourage participation in activities such as art, music, and sports. Because they grew up in an environment that provided resources for these pursuits, all of the adolescents in our sample had the opportunity to participate in their activities either in the school or in the community when they were young. These opportunities helped them to develop their skills and interests and shaped their participation in adolescence. Moreover, if these adolescents were not happy with their experience in their activity, there were a variety of alternative choices for teams or groups in their community.

In addition, all of the adolescents were exposed to a culture that placed importance on attending college and pursuing individual interests and talents in a career. As a consequence, the adolescents in our sample were able to entertain the possibility of continuing their activity in a university setting or professionally (rather than leaving it behind and doing something "more practical" to earn a living). This large availability of options and cultural support for participation undoubtedly contributed to these adolescents' participation patterns.

Immediate Context: Activity

In this section, we discuss two aspects of the individuals' perceptions of the immediate context that were important during adolescence. First, we discuss the importance the adolescents placed on being challenged. Second, we describe the costs and benefits that adolescents reported experiencing through their participation. In general, we found that if certain opportunities were not provided in the context, the adolescent did not have the chance to experience the positive aspects of participation.

Is There Enough Challenge?

Adolescents reported that it was important to participate in an activity where they felt an adequate level of challenge.

I never looked forward to relays [on the school team]. I mean, never. . . . I was always the fastest one on the relay . . . and everybody else is, like, holding me

down. I mean, maybe I could have won all by myself, but with everybody else, you know. (12th-grade male in swimming)

This quote suggests that if adolescents perceived too little challenge (and thus a high probability of success), they were not motivated to keep investing effort over time. In contrast, some adolescents perceived the challenge to be too great or felt that their ability was inadequate to continue competing at that level, and the frustration caused them to cease investing effort over time ($n = 7$). For example,

And then it just got to the point where I wasn't producing the same as when I was younger. I just kind of hit my peak when I was about 10 or 12. And it just got to the point where I didn't want to work as hard as you need to be good. (10th-grade female in swimming)

Another reason some adolescents decided to quit was that they believed they had the ability but that they were not being given enough opportunities by coaches to demonstrate their skills. For example, a 10th-grade male who played soccer said,

The coach probably kept me back. Because, I mean with him, it was more like if he liked you than how good you were, so his little favorites got all the playing time. (10th-grade male in soccer)

Interestingly, adolescents perceived differences in the amount of challenge in school and out-of-school activities. Several adolescents felt that their high school teams and classes were less challenging than were community-based organizations. A 10th-grade female in violin involved in both school and private lessons said,

I don't really like orchestras as much as private lessons. . . . You get less personal attention. In [school] orchestra you have to play at the level that the whole entire class can play at. It's usually lower than you'd like to play. I was in [another] orchestra on Saturday. So I was in private lessons and two orchestras at the same time. And they played really hard music then and I really liked it. (10th-grade female violinist)

Another female musician said about her school orchestra,

That orchestra stinks . . . I was the best one, I swear, in the city. Because the kids just don't care anymore. They do it because they think it's going to be an easy grade and they don't really care. They don't practice. They don't know anything. (12th-grade female violinist)

Adolescents discussed seeking out more challenge by participating in nonschool opportunities, such as community-organized or private teams and classes. For them to continue participating in their activity, it was important for these adolescents to find an activity that had adequate challenge and helped them to develop their skill.

“What’s in It for Me?”

These adolescents were not just seeking challenge and hard work. They reported a variety of positive aspects of participating in their activity. The most frequently cited benefits were related to social aspects ($n = 42$). For example,

Through dance, just stuff that I’ve done just makes me not shy anymore. It’s like I’m not afraid of people. (10th-grade female in dance)

It just enhanced my people skills and gave me a better sense of belonging. (12th-grade male in drama)

Participation increased adolescents’ opportunities to meet other individuals at the school who shared common interests and with whom they may not otherwise have come into contact. In addition, participation enhanced adolescents’ social skills and confidence in relating to peers both in and out of their activities.

“I Think I’ve Learned a Lot”

Adolescents also reported that they learned lessons and values, including the importance of discipline, getting along with others and working as team, responsibility and the importance of deadlines, dealing with disappointments, and the value of hard work and perseverance ($n = 33$). This quote from an adolescent involved in multiple activities illustrates the range of “life lessons” that can be gained from participation in a variety of activities.

What kinds of things have you learned through your involvement in this that has affected other areas of your life?

I think I’ve learned a lot of discipline from football. . . . I have never been shy, but I have learned just to become more comfortable speaking with people through drama. . . . In football you have to work together to pull a play off. You

have to work together as a choir. So I think teamwork, discipline, and friendships that I’ve made. (12th-grade male in football and choir)

Interestingly, these adolescents thought the skills they were learning in their activities were helping them in other contexts in their lives, such as their school and family. For instance, several adolescents thought that the time management and discipline they learned through participation in extracurricular activities helped their performance in school ($n = 11$). In addition, adolescents noted a variety of other positive aspects of their participation, including increased self-confidence ($n = 28$), more opportunities to spend time with their family around a shared activity ($n = 24$), and improved health ($n = 14$).

“It’s Stressful”

The adolescents also reported negative aspects of participating in their activity. The primary costs they discussed were related to emotional issues ($n = 32$). For instance, adolescents mentioned feeling pressured by the competition and feeling dejected when their performances did not match expectations. Adolescents also discussed having problems when they experienced conflict with their coach or teammates. Finally, adolescents reported feeling some stress over trying to balance their activities with other interests and obligations in their lives. The following quote by a 10th-grade female involved in multiple activities illustrates a common theme of tension:

It’s time consuming. I don’t have a lot of time to myself. I feel that my weekends aren’t even relaxing, especially right now. The rest of the year it’s OK, but right now, it’s really hard training. The school team starts up for training. And at the same time, I have drama club, so it’s like I go straight from soccer to rehearsal. Then on the weekends, it’s not even free time to me, it’s just when I have to get this work done, or have to do this around the house. And, it’s stressful. (10th-grade female in soccer and drama)

Lack of time was one factor that adolescents thought contributed to the feeling of stress. For instance, the adolescents discussed difficulty finding enough time to do schoolwork ($n = 21$), to be with their friends who were not in an activity ($n = 19$), and to try other activities ($n = 14$). In addition, adolescents noted the physical and financial consequences of participation. For instance, they often complained of feeling tired or being injured ($n = 8$) and discussed the financial costs, including the expense of buying equipment, attending community clubs, or taking private lessons ($n = 5$).

Weighing the Benefits and Costs

All of the adolescents appeared to weigh the positive and negative aspects of participation when making decisions about their continuing level of involvement. The following quote from a 12th-grade female in drama illustrates the balance of costs and benefits:

I don't even have time to go to work with this [activity], because it's after school every day until six. And I don't have time to do anything. And people have a hard time believing it can actually take so much of my time. But it's just like being an Olympic figure skater. You just love it so much you are willing to dedicate your life. . . . If I could act all of the time I would. (12th-grade female in drama)

As this quote suggests, adolescents who chose to remain in their activities throughout high school did perceive some negative aspects to participation, but they felt that the benefits they received far outweighed any costs, and they were willing to make sacrifices to continue.

In contrast, the 12 adolescents (in 15 activities) who decided to cease their involvement perceived the costs to be much greater than the benefits.

What do you think it takes to be a good dancer?

You have to have the desire to do it. You have to have the total commitment, which means going in every day. Going in Friday night for partnering. Going in Saturday all day, staying late for rehearsal. It's like you have to make the choice between if you want a life or if you want to dance. And that's what makes you good. (10th-grade female who quit dance)

These adolescents reported that to be successful in it, the activity had to be their whole life, and they were not willing to make this sacrifice.

Interplay Between Individual and Context

In the previous sections, we outlined the themes that emerged around psychological factors and individuals' perception of the context. Reviewing the adolescents' accounts in their interviews, it seemed that psychological factors and the individual's perception of context interacted reciprocally in the evaluation/decision-making process. When there was a mismatch, the individual had to reevaluate his or her level of commitment. For example, adolescents who initially got involved in their activity for social reasons had to reassess their motivations if their friends quit. However, adolescents who sought various kinds of fulfillment from the activity were more likely to continue.

Therefore, a match between individual needs and contextual factors appeared to enhance adolescents' willingness to stay involved in their activity.

"Who Am I?"

As they assessed their needs, the adolescents became clearer about how participation in their activity fit with their developing notion of who they were and what they valued. This emerging identity as a participant in a particular activity helped to shape the individual's perceptions of the context and their motivation for participating in it. A 9th-grade female in soccer told us,

I just can't see [soccer] not being part of my life, because it always was. Because I guess I've just always done it. I just always, you know, played. I can't like picture myself not playing soccer. It's something that I just enjoy to do. . . . It makes me feel good.

What does it mean to you to play sports?

If I couldn't play sports I just don't know what I'd do. Sports are just like a really important part of my life. (9th-grade female in soccer)

Several adolescents began to define themselves in terms of being an athlete, a musician, or an artist. For these individuals, the activity had become so much a part of who they were and what they valued that they could not envision not participating.

However, for other adolescents an identity as an athlete or artist did not fit with who they thought they wanted to be. For example,

The dream kind of faded away when I was maybe like 7 or 8. Cause it was like, what am I thinking? I'm never going to be a ballerina. I wasn't really, I've never always been like into doing lots of work. I've never really liked that. And I didn't really want to have to work. I was just in ballet class to take ballet and just do something, have fun. And then later on, I realized that I just didn't like it and I quit. (10th-grade female who quit ballet)

These adolescents were unlikely to want to continue their activity at an intense level and instead devoted their time to other interests that were more in line with who they thought they wanted to become.

Our analysis also suggested that adolescents assessed whether the values espoused by their activities fit with their own personal beliefs and values. If they perceived a mismatch, they were likely to cease involvement or choose another activity that had a better fit with their values. For instance, a 9th-grade male decided to quit playing basketball, his primary passion, because of his religious beliefs:

It pretty much happened when I was baptized in my church. It's not a rule that you don't become involved in sports and stuff. . . . I think a lot of people have thought it's not as good for them spiritually as they thought. When I first started, I knew it was not a rule, but I knew it was kind of expected of me. . . . I just know I'm a very competitive person, and I think when I was playing, it was too much for my own good. . . . I enjoy the competition, I enjoy being caught up in the competition. But it wasn't always the best for me, because there were times that it made me do things I regretted later. (9th-grade male who quit basketball)

Another example of the incongruence between the values in the domain and personal values was evident in discussions of the differences between individual and team sports. Five adolescents made a choice between several sports based on their preferences for team activities. For example, a 10th-grade female who had to make a decision between swimming and soccer said,

I think that soccer's a lot more exciting, it has a lot more variety. Just it's a lot more fun.

Why is it more fun?

Just because it's a team sport, and swimming is an individual sport. You swim for your times. And it's a team sport, but you don't really concentrate on your team. You don't think of it that way. You think of it for yourself. And soccer, when you're playing, you think of the whole team. You're not thinking of what I can do to be better, you're thinking of what can I do to make the team better. (10th-grade female in soccer, who quit swimming)

"Will I Do This in the Future?"

Adolescents' developing identities and values also affected their decisions about participation in the future. Almost half of the adolescents thought they would continue in some form after high school ($n = 20$). Although most adolescents wanted to participate in their activity as a hobby in the future, nine adolescents reported aspiring to a professional career directly as an athlete, actress, or musician or indirectly through production, coaching, or teaching. We do not know if these adolescents will actually follow through on their aspirations, but interestingly, by high school, we could already observe differences in the way adolescents who aspired to a career discussed the importance of involvement in their activities compared with the other adolescents.

What appeared to distinguish the adolescents who aspired to a career from the others was that they seemed to exhibit a passion in their activity that was not evident in the other participants.

I get my self-satisfaction out of playing, even if I'm not playing well. . . . I love to play. . . . When I want to be alone I play my violin. When I'm feeling depressed I play my violin. And even when I'm . . . feeling really happy I'll play my violin and I'll feel happier. (12th-grade female in instrumental music)

They reported getting so much emotional satisfaction that they wanted to do their activity all of the time. In addition, these career-track individuals' identities were so intertwined with the activity that they could not imagine life without it. Although they did perceive the potential financial risk and uncertainty of achieving occupational success in their chosen domain, these adolescents were willing to take risks because the activity was so central to their current and future identity. In summary, the adolescents' developing identities helped to guide their decisions about involvement and affected their perceptions of the opportunities available in the activity.

Interpretive Framework

The synergy between psychological factors, context, and identity formation helped to shape individuals' future pathways to either include or exclude their activity. As we discussed this dynamic, we developed an interpretive framework (see Figure 1) that illustrates our ideas about how these aspects seem to be related in this sample of participants. This type of model is different than a model in quantitative methodology because it represents an understanding of interrelationships among factors that arose from the data (and can lead to future research questions) rather than predetermined hypotheses that we developed prior to analyzing the data (see Miles & Huberman, 1994, for a discussion of model building in qualitative research).

To summarize our interpretive framework, the participation process begins with exposure to opportunities and early encouragement in childhood. Decisions about whether to continue or quit in adolescence are based on a complex interplay of individual factors, context, and identity development. At any point, if the interplay between these components becomes inharmonious, the adolescent is likely to quit. However, as long as all of the factors work together synergistically, there is a strong possibility that adolescents will continue to participate in their chosen activities into young adulthood.

The far left side of the figure shows the early opportunities to participate in the school or community that need to be available initially for individuals to develop their skills and interests. The center portion illustrates the decision-making process concerning continued involvement, starting at about the beginning of high school. This process is depicted as a dynamic circle, with components of individual factors (person) and context (activity) influencing each other and the adolescents' identity reciprocally. We portray the central-

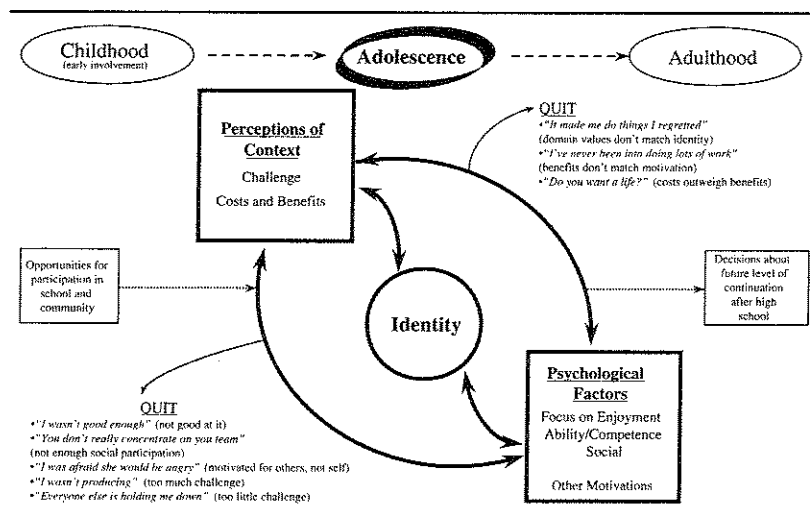


Figure 1. Interpretative framework of adolescents' decision-making process.

ity of identity by locating it at the core of the decision-making process, being influenced reciprocally by both individual and contextual factors, which also influence each other. At any point during this dynamic process, the adolescent could decide to quit or change his or her level of involvement. The reasons for quitting the activity are depicted as arrows from the circle, meaning that the adolescent did not stay in the activity long enough to stay in the circle. The last portion (on the right side) of the model examines how adolescents who have decided to continue in their activity determine what level of commitment they will have in college and adulthood.

DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS

This study extends previous work by using a qualitative approach to examine adolescents' involvement in extracurricular activities. We have provided an in-depth and ecologically valid account of why adolescents participate in extracurricular activities and why they quit. This study was ecologically valid because we examined the nature of the extracurricular participation as perceived by the adolescent and considered the process of human development in dynamic rather than static terms (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The participation decisions are important because extracurricular activities provide an arena in which adolescents can experiment with a role other than student or

child and, in a supportive setting, experience some of the challenges they may face as adults (Fine, Mortimer, & Roberts, 1990; Iso-Ahola, 1980).

We noted that divergent trajectories of involvement emerged during adolescence as the stakes of involvement were raised. We presented reasons that some individuals became more involved at this point whereas others chose to cease their involvement or switch to another activity. This finding expands previous research that simply documented changes in adolescents' participation over time. What makes this study unique is that we listened to adolescents' own words about both their sense of themselves and their perceptions of the contextual factors that account for patterns of engagement and disengagement within an activity over time.

Through our study, we were able to fill some of the gaps in the literature. For example, we described the process by which extracurricular participation enhances and impedes desirable outcomes, such as making friends, feeling that one belongs, feeling that one is good at something, learning valuable lessons about how to manage one's time and get along with others, and exploring one's identity. Furthermore, the adolescents in our study provided insight about why and how, not just when, they chose to continue participation or quit and how their own needs and elements of the context affected these decisions. Finally, we examined participation across a wide variety of activities, especially music and art, which have been understudied in the past.

The two most common reasons adolescents reported participating in their activity is that they were good at it and that their friends were involved. These results support motivational theories that stress an individual's needs including (a) the need for competence, or feeling effective in interacting with the environment; and (b) the need for relatedness, or having close relationships and feeling securely connected to the social world (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; White, 1959). The results of this study indicate that participation in athletics and the arts can provide a context for adolescents to satisfy these basic needs. This is an important finding because often other contexts in adolescents' lives, such as the family and school, fail to meet these developmental needs (Eccles et al., 1993).

Individuals' perceptions of the context also play a crucial role in their decisions about level of involvement. We found that an appropriate level of challenge that matches an individual's skill is critical for continued involvement. This pattern appears to parallel Csikszentmihalyi's flow construct, where motivation is maximized when an individual perceives that the activity affords high challenge and that his or her level of skill is adequate to take on the challenge (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993).

Unfortunately, many of the participants felt that their school programs were not challenging enough and sometimes held them back from improving

their skills. Several of these adolescents strategically sought out other environments in the community to provide them with challenge. This finding poses a dilemma in terms of implications for practice, a dilemma similar to the tension between equity and excellence in education. Should we provide equal access to all motivated youth, or should we provide more challenge so that those with the most skill can continue to improve? This is a topic for further research and discussion in the field.

Our findings also have some clear implications for practice. Teachers and coaches should try to create mastery-oriented contexts in which adolescents can feel competent and can receive some recognition for their effort and accomplishments. An overemphasis on competition and winning at all costs may result in high attrition rates because these practices highlight the skills of only the most able individuals. In addition, coaches and teachers need to acknowledge that one of the reasons adolescents participate is to fulfill their social goals. Thus, regular practices supplemented by special events such as parties or out-of-town competitions can provide adolescents with time to socialize. These events should be recognized as an integral, positive part of adolescents' extracurricular experiences.

Finally, our findings highlight the many positive aspects of participation in extracurricular activities. Our interviews indicate that participation can provide multiple benefits, including enjoyment, recognition, increased confidence, and social support. These findings add support to recommendations for more opportunities for adolescents to participate in productive and structured activities (Carnegie Council, 1992). Unfortunately, participation in high school extracurricular activities is often viewed as nonessential and is one of the first items to be cut during fiscal constraints. Educators should reevaluate these assumptions because of the potential benefits and importance of participation in the high school experience of many adolescents.

However, as we have seen, participation is not without its costs. Intense involvement in one activity limited the time adolescents could be pursuing other interests or experimenting with other roles. Moreover, some adolescents experience emotional strain from the pressure of balancing their activities with other interests and obligations. This seemed to occur more when adolescents were involved in multiple activities, although these adolescents did appear to be able handle these pressures. There is a need for more research on how adolescents can reap the benefits of participation without incurring large costs.

The conclusions of this study should be interpreted in light of the following limitations. First, our sample is drawn from middle-class European American families, who have greater access to opportunities and resources than do adolescents from less financially advantaged families. Although this

sample is not representative of the larger population from which it was drawn, the idea of purposive sampling is in accordance with recommendations outlined by other qualitative researchers and can provide insight for issues for further investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Nonetheless, there remains a need for research with more disadvantaged children whose families may not have the resources or time to play a central role in supporting involvement and nurturing talent (Eccles & Alfeld-Liro, in press).

Another limitation is that we focus on adolescents' reports of their reasons for staying and leaving an activity. This results in a single perspective (adolescents' voice) on the reasons why they stay and leave activities, which potentially neglects external reasons, such as being cut from an activity. Finally, although we focus on overall themes, it is important to note that there may be differences by gender, age, type of activity, and length of involvement. Because of our small sample size, we were not able to systematically examine group differences in the frequency of each theme by each of these subgroups. Investigations of these group differences may be better suited to a large-scale quantitative analysis of participation.

The results of the current study also suggest important questions for future research. First, there is a need for work on how the relation between extracurricular participation and positive and negative outcomes may vary depending on the characteristics of the individual and the context. We need to understand better under what conditions extracurricular participation has positive consequences. Second, research is needed that systematically examines the relations between different motivations and participation in extracurricular activities across different school contexts. For example, social motivation may be a stronger predictor in large schools because of a less personalized environment. Third, there is a need for research that examines developmental changes in the importance of social aspects and identity development in decision making across time. Fourth, it is still important to ask when too much participation is harmful, either in terms of time or number of activities, for academic and psychological outcomes. Finally, in this study, we interviewed adolescents' about their perceptions of parents, peers, and coaches. In the future, it will be important to incorporate the perspectives of these socializers regarding how they support adolescents' involvement in extracurricular activities.

In conclusion, our interviews with adolescents who were once highly involved and competent in extracurricular activities offered a perspective on increasing and decreasing commitment to extracurricular participation during adolescence. Decisions regarding extracurricular participation are made up of a complex synergy of enjoyment of the activity, feeling competent at the task, being in a socially supportive environment, perceiving the context as

challenging, perceiving more benefits than costs, and being in an activity that supports identity development. The information we obtained can help practitioners to create environments that support continued involvement and ultimately provide the most benefits for developing adolescents.

NOTES

1. The mean age at the conclusion of interviewing (May 1996) was 16 years, 1 month.
2. The parent was paid \$15, and the adolescent was paid \$10. The difference in payment was because we had also recently collected surveys and had paid the parent \$5 and the adolescent \$10. Therefore, the total paid to each participant was \$20 for both survey and interview.
3. We asked for the mother when calling participants' homes because our past experience with these families has indicated that, for the most part, the mothers are more aware than the fathers of both the adolescents' activities and of the family dynamics over the years. However, we gave families a choice of which parent was to be interviewed. In two cases, the father wanted to do the interview, and in one case, the parents insisted on being interviewed together.
4. Each participant was able to ask questions about the study before he or she read and signed a consent form regarding the general procedure, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of participation.
5. One researcher ceased her involvement at this point, and another female researcher joined the team.
6. This name has been changed.

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