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The Present and Future of Research on Activity Settings as Developmental Contexts

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In chapter 1, we foreshadowed what this book would be about and summarized why people might want to understand organized activities as developmental contexts. We began by defining *organized activities* as activities "characterized by structure, adult supervision, and an emphasis on skill-building" (p. 4) and pointed out that participation in such activities is often voluntary and heavily dependent on access. We discussed the hypothesis that participating in such organized activities should facilitate the attainment of age-appropriate competencies, which in turn should "allow an individual to take advantage of personal and environmental resources that promote positive functioning in the present, reduce the risk for developing problem behaviors, and increase the likelihood for healthy adjustment in the future" (p. 6). We also provided a brief review of the evidence to support this hypothesis and discussed the characteristics of programs likely to moderate the impact of participation on development as well as the opportunities for, and barriers to, participation that influence access.

In this chapter, I discuss the major themes that emerged in chapter 2 through chapter 15, focusing on theoretical and methodological issues, and make suggestions for where this field of study should go in the future. I organize my comments about the theoretical themes around three broad questions: Who gets into organized activities? Who stays in these activities? And

what are the consequences of participating in organized activities? I organize my comments about methodology around the relevance of different methods for addressing various theoretical and applied questions.

THEORETICAL THEMES

Who Participates?

This question has two parts: Who gets into and who continues to participate in organized activities? I address the first part now. The authors of several of the chapters discussed many reasons why individuals might choose to participate in various organized activities. Common reasons included learning new skills, developing existing skills, competing with members of other organized teams or groups, exploring and solidifying one's personal identities, being with one's friends, having fun, filling time, escaping alternative bad situations, and gaining skills needed for unrelated short- and long-term goals.

At a most basic level, several authors stressed the utility of activity participation for being with one's friends and spending time doing things that are enjoyable. This theme is particularly salient in the chapters by O'Neill (chap. 12), by Stattin et al. (chap. 10), and by Scanlan et al. (chap. 13). In their discussion of the motivational consequences of various types of coaching patterns, Duda and Ntoumanis (chap. 14) also make it clear that participating in organized sports can be fun. These chapters provide excellent examples of the ways in which activity participation can facilitate a range of positive emotional experiences—from just the good feelings associated with spending quality time with one's friends to the intense emotional and cognitive state of flow. Undoubtedly, this opportunity is the reason why many youth participate in organized activities. Unfortunately, these positive emotional experiences are not always obtained and sometimes experiences with one's friends can have negative consequences for development. I discuss this more later.

The link between activity participation and identity formation and consolidation is stressed in the chapters by Barber et al. (chap. 9), Jacobs et al. (chap. 11), McIntosh et al. (chap. 15), and O'Neill (chap. 12). Each of these authors pointed out that participating in specific activities helps one explore related identities (e.g., being a jock, or a civic-minded person, or a musician, or a feminine or masculine person). If one discovers a good fit of a specific identity with one's experiences of the demands and opportunities associated with the related activity domain, then one is likely to continue both participating in the activity and consolidating the parts of one's identities associated with that activity. In addition, McIntosh et al. (chap. 15) provide

evidence that participating in service activities helps in the more general process of identity exploration and consolidation.

Some organized activities, particularly sports and competitive arts and music activities, provide an arena for competition. Some individuals participate in these activities because these activities provide the opportunity for the individuals to develop their own skills to the high levels necessary to compete against others in valued domains. This basis for participating in organized activities and the consequences and correlates of such participation is discussed extensively by Duda and Ntoumanis (chap. 14) and by Scanlan et al. (chap. 13). As these authors point out, engaging in activities for competitive reasons can produce either positive or quite negative emotional responses at the individual level and either positive or quite negative interaction patterns between peer and between the youth and either their parents or their coaches and teachers. Even more importantly, highly competitive situations likely produce a complex mix of positive and negative emotional reactions and interpersonal relationships. We are just beginning to understand the situational and personal factors that influence this mix.

The authors of several chapters also discuss the fact that children and adolescents are not always the initiators of participation. Parents play a big role in getting and keeping their children in activities. Parents do this for many reasons. Jacobs et al. (chap. 11) discuss how parents' gender role stereotypes could lead them to put their sons and daughters into different types of activities either because they want their children to learn gender-role-appropriate skills or because they assume their children have gender-role stereotypic abilities and interests. Both Duda and Ntoumanis (chap. 14) and Scanlan et al. (chap. 13) discuss how parents enroll their children in sports for different reasons and that these reasons have a substantial impact on their children's experiences while doing the activity as well as on the children's own motivation for participating. Finally, Casey et al. (chap. 4) discuss the need of parents to find safe places for the children during the after-school hours and how welfare reform policies provided the funds for some parents to fulfill this need. In some neighborhoods, parents feel safe taking their children to organized activities settings; in other neighborhoods, parents may see the community centers and organized activities as dangerous and a risk for their children's development.

At a more macrolevel, one needs to consider access issues. Not all young people have equal access to organized activities. Kleiber and Powell (chap. 2) discuss the historical changes in both the availability and the reasons for organized, out-of-school activity settings. They conclude that we are now in a period in which there is substantial support for such activity settings because our society is convinced that formal programs can reduce the prevalence of problem behaviors, can promote positive youth development, and can increase school achievement. Nonetheless, as both Pedersen and

Seidman (chap. 5), and Villarruel et al. (chap. 6) stress, there is still great inequity in access to high quality, culturally appropriate, organized activities. Casey et al. (chap. 4) reiterate this theme in their discussion of why the adolescents in the welfare reform programs are not participating at high rates in organized activities. Finally, several of the authors, including Kirshner et al. (chap 7), Osgood et al. (chap. 3), and Pedersen and Seidman (chap. 5), point out that the opportunities for participation in organized community-based activities is lower for adolescents than for preteens. In addition, the number of slots for participation in some types of extracurricular school-based activities (e.g., sports) decline and become more competitive over the high-school years. All of these factors make it quite difficult for some youth who would like to participate in organized activities to actually have this opportunity.

The second part of the question "Who participates?" relates to the issue of who *continues* to participate. Many of the factors just discussed as reasons for starting to participate also help explain who continues to participate. But few studies have actually directly addressed this question. Presumably, youth will continue to participate if doing so is important, enjoyable, and not too emotionally, psychologically, behaviorally, or financially costly. Some aspects of each of these factors are discussed in various chapters. Casey et al. (chap. 4), for example, discuss the possibility that older adolescents do not participate because they need or want to work for pay instead. In their discussions of the motivational processes involved in sport participation and the importance of the quality of the experience, both Duda and Ntoumanis (chap. 14) and Scanlan et al. (chap. 13) offer several suggestions for types of emotional and competence-related experiences that would either facilitate continued participation or drive participants away. The impact of the quality of the experience on continued participation is also discussed by O'Neill (chap. 12). McIntosh et al. (chap. 15), O'Neill (chap. 12), Villarruel et al. (chap. 6), and Kirshner et al. (chap. 7) also discuss the critical role of a sense of connectedness as a powerful reason for continued participation.

The importance of person–environment fit and identity consolidation are discussed extensively by Barber et al. (chap. 9), McIntosh et al. (chap. 15), O'Neill (chap. 12), and Villaruel et al. (chap. 6). Each of these authors stress the fact the people will enjoy most activity settings that provide the kinds of experiences most valued by the individuals; for example, activities that allow individuals to perfect those skills that they value or that people close to them value. Often such activities are closely linked to the individuals' emerging value system as well as the individuals' emerging personal and social identities. Good person-environment fit can also reflect the opportunity to spend time doing things that the individual enjoys and in which the individual gets to experience a sense of flow. Finally, good person–environ-

mental fit can emerge from a good developmental fit with individual's increasing maturity. We know that young people often drop out of organized activities as they move into adolescence. Many reasons have been offered ranging from lack of opportunities to participate to the need to do other things with one's time (which I discuss in this chapter). One likely reason that has received relatively little attention except in the work by McLaughlin and her colleagues (Kirshner et al., chap. 7), and Eccles and her colleagues (Barber et al., chap. 9) is the possible failure of organized programs to provide the kinds of roles that adolescents might find challenging and respectful of their increasing maturity and expertise. McLaughlin (2000) provided extensive examples of organized programs that allow youth to play increasing leadership and teaching roles as they mature in the programs. Such increases are examples of what Eccles and her colleagues have labeled *Stage–Environment Fit* (Eccles et al., 1993), by which they meant activities that fit well with the developmental needs of the participants and that change in ways that reflect the changing developmental needs and strengths of the participants. More studies focused on why youth leave programs are needed to test these many hypotheses.

One related influence on continued participation is not discussed in any great detail except by Casey et al. (chap. 4). This is the psychological and behavioral costs of continued participation. Individuals do not have the time or energy to participate in an unlimited number of organized activities. They must make choices among available options. We understand relatively little about the determinants of these choices. As Casey et al. (chap. 4) point out, the need to work for pay during the out-of-school hours may lead some youth to drop out of organized activities. Similarly, the increasing competitiveness of some types of organized activities may require youth to focus on one particular activity and drop out of other activities. Increasing social pressures to behave in ways appropriate to one's gender or one's cultural group may lead youth to narrow their participation to activities that fit well with these roles or other socially prescribed roles. The needs of one's family may require some youth to drop out of organized activities that either are considered luxuries that the family cannot afford or that take time away from other activities considered critical for the family's well-being. I could provide additional examples but we do not have sufficient space for greater elaboration. What is important is that more work is needed on the personal and social factors that either facilitate continued participation or precipitate discontinuing one's participation in either specific organized activities or more generally in the whole range of organized volunteer activities themselves. Such work needs to consider the kinds of structural barriers discussed by Kleiber and Powell (chap. 2), Pedersen and Seidman (chap. 5), and Villarruel et al. (chap. 6), as well as the many more psychological factors discussed in the majority of the chapters.

Consequences of Participation

What are the consequences of participating in organized activities? This question is important to both policymakers and basic researchers; the former to make wise funding decisions, the latter to advance our understanding of human development. Policymakers often ask the question in its most general form: Does participation in some activity setting affect some loosely selected set of positive youth outcomes like school grades or avoidance of problem behavior or increases in prosocial behaviors or character traits? The underlying question is whether there are sufficient benefits of the program to warrant the dollars spent on the program. Typically, the question is answered through some form of program evaluation.

As I discuss later, such a general approach has limited utility either for future program development or for increasing our understanding of the impact of organized activities on human development. As the studies in this book show, one needs to be much more specific about both the outcomes and the nature of the experience at the activity setting before one can learn very much about the impact of participation in structured activities on development. There are now numerous studies documenting a link between participation and developmental outcomes using both longitudinal survey type designs and experimental treatment designs. We summarize some of these findings in chapter 1. There is also increasing evidence that both the quality and the nature of the experience matters. Certainly this one of the key findings across the chapters in this book; the results clearly show that the developmental consequences of participating in organized activities depend on the nature of the experience. In addition, when tested, the developmental consequences often depend on characteristics of the participants as well. Program evaluation studies need to take this fact into account if the studies are to inform program development and wise programming decisions. In chapter 1, we summarize the characteristics of general programs that are likely to matter for program effects. I discuss the relevance of the findings reported in this book for these characteristics later.

Both applied and basic developmental scientists are also interested in consequences of participation in organized activities. But because the kinds of developmental scientists represented in this book are interested in understanding the nature of socialization and development in organized activity settings (see also Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Larson, 2000), we typically look at programs in much more nuanced and specific ways than policymakers and funders. For both qualitatively and quantitatively oriented developmental researchers, a theoretical framework linking specific experiences to specific outcomes is critical—either as the grounded product of intensive qualitative work or as the overarching guide for more prospective quantitative studies. In addition, the most informative work also clearly ar-

ticulates the mechanisms proposed to underlie the associations between these two specific sets of constructs.

The chapters in this book provide several excellent examples of the beginnings of such in-depth theorizing. For instance, consider the chapters on sport. The authors of both of these chapters (Duda & Ntoumanis, chap. 14; Scanlan et al., chap. 13) lay out a clear theoretical framework that links specific experiences in organized sport programs to specific psychological and behavioral consequences for the participants. Furthermore, they specify the experiential and personal characteristics linked to both positive and negative consequences for the participants. On one hand, coaching practices that create a task-focused motivational climate create more enjoyment, greater persistence, and better skill learning than coaching practices that create an ego-focused motivational climate. On the other hand, both Duda and Ntoumanis (chap. 14) and Scanlan et al. (chap. 13) discuss how participating in some types of organized sport programs can be quite anxiety provoking and psychologically painful, depending on characteristics of both the participants and their families, as well as characteristics of the coaches and the athletic program.

The importance of specific characteristics of the activity settings is also stressed by Stattin et al. (chap. 10). They report evidence showing that participation in certain types of activity centers with particular types of peers can lead some adolescents into increased problem behaviors. These findings resonate with issues discussed by Osgood et al. (chap. 3), who summarize evidence that spending lots of time with peers in unstructured settings leads to increases in problem behavior. The activity centers studied by Stattin et al. had very little structure and thus were likely to increase the probability of being recruited into a peer group that engages in the kinds of activities that will increase the "situational motivation" of the participants to take part in normbreaking behaviors.

Clearly the answer to question, "What are the consequences of participating in organized activities?" is "it depends." We are just beginning to understand exactly what "it" depends on. To move forward, we need well-articulated theories that specify, at a minimum, the links from (a) the characteristics of the activity setting to the behaviors of the adults and peers in that setting, (b) the behaviors of the adults and peers in the setting to changes in the participants, and (c) changes in the proposed mediating characteristics of participants to changes in the "outcome" characteristics of the participants. One can elaborate and add theoretical links depending on one's intellectual discipline and the level of question being asked by the study. For example, more sociological and/or anthropological developmental scientists and policymakers might well want to know the links between larger societal characteristics and both the characteristics and the availability of activity settings. Systems theorists might want to know

which organization characteristics facilitate a community center having all high-quality programs rather than a mix of high- and low-quality experiences for its participants. Evaluations of community centers provide evidence that the quality of experiences often vary across activities within a center (Eccles & Gootman, 2001). We need theories to guide research on the impact of such local diversity on the participants. Chapter 2 through chapter 15 provide examples of the beginnings of both the building and testing of such theories.

What Matters?

Several themes about what matters emerge in chapter 2 through chapter 15. One important factor is the very essence of structured programs—the presence of adult supervision over structured activities. Osgood et al. (chap. 3) summarize the evidence that extensive periods of time in unstructured activities with peers are linked with higher levels of problem behaviors. According to Stattin et al. (chap. 10) high involvement with risky peers at "organized" centers with limited adult supervision and limited structured activities also predicts increased levels of nonnormative and problem behaviors. It is likely that the relative lack of structure and adult supervision in these centers contributes to this finding.

Closely related to the issue of adult supervision are the characteristics of developmentally appropriate levels of structure and positive relationships with adults. Both of these characteristics are well illustrated in the chapters by Larson et al. (chap. 10) and by Kirshner et al. (chap. 7). Larson et al. provide a very complete picture of what developmentally appropriate levels of structure look like in action. Their chapter also illustrates the close connections between providing appropriate levels of structure, high-quality instruction, and the formation of close bonds between adolescents and the adult supervisors in organized activity settings. Kirshner et al. illustrate further the ways in which appropriate levels of structure and high-quality instruction can empower youth to be active participants in the research activity itself.

Although the role of close relationships with adult mentors is not a specific focus in chapters 2 through chapter 15, the presences of highly involved adult supervisors, who are also not overcontrolling, should increase the likelihood of participants developing close relationships with adults who might then serve as mentors. The specific power of mentorship relationships is discussed by Rhodes and Spencer (chap. 19) in the final set of chapters.

Another important factor in several chapters is the nature of the other participants and the individuals' peer group. Osgood et al. (chap. 3) provides strong evidence of the negative power of peers in the absence of organized activities. Stattin et al. (chap. 10) illustrate the power of the peers

whom youth meet and associate with in organized centers. Similarly, Barber et al. (chap. 9) illustrate the fact that both the negative and positive outcomes of participating in organized extracurricular activities are mediated by the nature of one's peer group. Finally, Petersen and Seidman (chap. 5) argue that exposure to risky peers could be one reason why participating in some types of organized activities increases problem and antisocial behaviors. They also suggest that presence of prosocial peers might help explain the relation between participation in organized religious activities and positive youth development.

The importance of the quality of the instruction and the opportunities to experience a sense of efficacy and optimal motivation is explicated best in the two sport chapters (Duda & Ntoumanis, chap. 14; Scanlan et al., chap. 13), O'Neill (chap. 12) on music, Kirshner et al. (chap. 7) on bringing youth to the research process, and Larson et al. (chap. 8) on the association of participation with developing initiative. The relevance of these characteristics for skill development is stressed by several authors. The relevance of the opportunities to experience a sense of efficacy for understanding the lower participation rates of adolescents in organized programs is also discussed by Casey et al. (chap. 4). Finally, the chapters by McIntosh et al. (chap. 15), Kirshner et al. (chap. 7), and Larson et al. (chap. 8) also illustrate the importance of a related program characteristic—provision of opportunities to make a meaningful difference—that is, to matter.

Both McIntosh et al. (chap. 15) and Barber et al. (chap. 9) discuss and demonstrate empirically the role that participating in organized activities can play in identity formation and consolidation. These authors argue that providing an opportunity to explore one's identities may be one of the most important characteristics of organized activity settings for adolescents.

Finally, several of the authors discuss the important role that participating in organized activities can play in building individuals' connectness to both social institutions and prosocial groups. Both O'Neill (chap. 12) and Barber et al. (chap. 9) discuss the role that participating in the musical and sports programs at school can play to increase school engagement and school attachment. McIntosh et al. (chap. 15) make the same claims for the role of service activities in the school. Larson et al. (chap. 8) discuss a similar phenomenon for organizations such as the National Future Farmers of America. Finally, Pedersen and Seidman (chap. 5) suggest that the association between participation in organized religious activities and positive youth development may be mediated in part by a sense of connectedness to prosocial institutions and prosocial peer groups.

In summary, the results reported in chapter 2 through chapter 15 confirm the importance of the program characteristics outlined in chapter 1 for positive youth development. Some of the findings, however, remain at a quite general level despite the fact that the authors offer many quite specific hy-

potheses regarding the likely mechanisms underlying these associations. The next generation of studies needs to focus more on the specifics.

METHODOLOGICAL THEMES AND ISSUES

Looking across the new and reviewed studies and the studies in the chapters in this book, I was struck by the variety in the design features represented. The studies reported or reviewed used methods ranging from (a) in-depth ethnographic studies of small local programs, (b) cross-sectional and longitudinal survey-type studies of youth development across a diverse set of contexts, (c) large- and small-scale experimental program evaluations, (d) descriptive studies of programs considered to be effective by the communities in which they reside, and (e) meta-analyses of both published and nonpublished reports. The new studies reported in chapter 2 through chapter 15 focused mostly on local programs housed in schools or community-based youth centers or programs, or on longitudinal studies of populations of youth who reported their involvement in such extracurricular or community-based programs. This range of research designs reflects both the goals of the researchers, funders, and policymakers, and the current state of our knowledge. The field associated with the scientific study of organized activities as developmental contexts is very new. Research focused on the domain of organized sport is probably the most mature and even it is still in its childhood. Research focused on other domains of organized activities is even less mature. Yet policymakers are calling for advice on which programs to fund. The range of designs represented in this book reflect the tension between doing carefully designed, theoretically driven work that might inform program development and the demand of policymakers to determine if specific programs work or not. I say more about this later.

The studies throughout this book also vary in the types of participants studied and the outcomes assessed. The heterogeneity in the outcomes is particularly striking—ranging from increases in academic achievement, school engagement, mental health, and life skills to decreases in, or avoidance of, such problematic outcomes as teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug use and/or abuse, and involvement in delinquent and violent behaviors. This range represents both the growing importance of the promotive orientations inherent in both positive psychology and positive youth development and the continuing concerns with preventing problem behaviors in our young people. The diversity in the range across studies, however, makes it difficult to compare across studies. What is needed are studies with more comprehensive sets of developmental indicators of the young people's functioning across the multiple domains thought to be influenced by participating in organized activities. It is clear from just the studies in this book that experi-

ences in organized activities are likely to have many different effects on the participants and that these effects depend on multiple characteristics of the activity settings themselves. We would know a lot more if we regularly measured multiple aspects of both the contexts themselves and the developmental functioning of the participants.

The range of populations included in the studies reported in this book is wider than often represented in books published in North America; it includes populations from Sweden and England, as well as populations from both urban and more suburban communities in the United States. A couple of chapters also include youth of color growing up in quite poor urban communities. Nonetheless, the heterogeneity is still not as diverse as it should be given the diversity of youth across the world potentially being influenced by the presence or absence of high quality organized activity settings. The authors have done as much as they can with the studies available to them. Nonetheless, as pointed out so well by Villarruel et al. (chap. 6) and by Pedersen and Seidman (chap. 5), we need studies that examine the issues raised in all of the chapters on the many understudied populations of youth in the United States. There is even a greater need for more studies of youth from different cultures and different regions of the world (Larson & Verma, 1999). The variations in the findings across the populations included in the chapters make it clear that the both the benefits and the costs of participation in different types of organized activities varies across different types of young people. Understanding these variations is essential both for our understanding of the dynamics that govern the influence of these activity experiences and settings on human development and for the design of appropriate organized activities for the many different types of youth in this country.

Now let me turn to a more specific discussion of the methods used along with suggestions for future research.

Qualitative Studies

Larson et al. (chap. 8) illustrate the power of qualitative studies to generate new hypotheses and to help us understand the mechanisms underlying program effects. Larson argues that qualitative studies are essential for theory building, particularly in a field that is still quite new. The importance of the qualitative work by McLaughlin and Heath, reviewed to some extent by Kirshner et al. (chap. 7), is another example of the power of qualitative research and mixed-method research to move our understanding forward (see also McLaughlin, 2000). A variety of techniques are used in these qualitative studies, including techniques that involve the youth themselves as active researchers. Other techniques include the experience-sampling techniques developed by Larson and colleagues, focus groups, participant

observation, ethnography, neighborhood mapping, and intensive qualitative interviews with both participants and the adult in the program as supervisors, leaders, teachers, coaches, mentors, and parents.

Quantitative Survey and Longitudinal Studies

Many of the studies reviewed in these chapters relied on either cross-sectional or longitudinal survey-type methods that link participation in organized activities to a variety of different individual level outcomes—typically, indicators of school achievement and engagement, mental health, social development, and involvement in several different types of problem behaviors. The primary goal of such studies is to describe the relation between participation and other individual-level indicators of youth development. Few of the reviewed studies, outside of the field of sports psychology, directly measured characteristics of the programs themselves, making it difficult to know which aspects of the activity setting were responsible for the developmental changes in the participants. Nonetheless, this basic descriptive work is a necessary first step toward firm inferential conclusions.

The reports of several new studies with new analyses in several of the chapters and the work reported in the two sport chapters illustrate what is gained when we focus more directly on the characteristics of the activity settings themselves and when we specify more specifically the mechanisms that might underlie the relation between participating in organized activities and developmental changes in the participants. In these studies, the researchers measured the hypothesized mediators of participation on individual change and then used causal modeling techniques to test these hypo- theses. Such analytic designs tell us more about the plausible "causes" of the any longitudinal changes that might be associated with participation in the activity. For example, in several of the chapters, the researchers used complex analytic strategies with longitudinal studies to test specific hypotheses about the mechanism that might underlie the relations obtained between participation in various types of organized activities and activity settings and both positive and negative developmental outcomes (e.g., the tests of mediation and moderation used in the chapters by Stattin et al., chap. 10, Osgood et al., chap. 3, and Barber et al., chap. 9).

Others used similar methods to test hypotheses regarding individual differences in the impact of particular experiences on developmental changes. As evident in Jacobs et al. (chap. 11), Pedersen and Seidman (chap. 5), McIntosh et al. (chap. 15), Sttatin et al. (chap. 10), Barber et al. (chap. 9), Duda and Ntoumanis (chap. 14), and Scanlan et al. (chap. 13), youth who participate in activities differ among themselves in many ways, ranging from demographic and social characteristics of their families and communities and their own gender to more psychological characteristics such as their

identity clarity, achievement goals, initial levels of competence, and the characteristics of their friends and peer group. The results of these new studies demonstrate that the relations of various contextual characteristics of organized activities with a wide variety of developmental changes vary in systematic and theoretically interesting ways across participants.

However, even the more sophisticated longitudinal studies of activities and activities settings are subject to selection concerns. As evident in the chapters by Jacobs et al. (chap. 11), Pedersen and Seidman (chap. 5), McIntosh et al. (chap. 15), and Osgood et al. (chap. 3), youth who participate in various types of activity settings are often fundamentally different than youth who do not. In part, this is a necessary consequence of the fact that participation in these settings or programs is typically voluntary. Nonetheless, these differences make causal inferences about participation effects difficult. Osgood et al. (chap. 3) discuss the utility of fixed effect models as one solution to this problem. Alternatively, because one major concern related to selection effects focuses on the likelihood that associations reflect the impact of unmeasured third variables, some of the longitudinal studies included the most obvious third variables likely to provide an alternative explanation for longitudinal changes. Although this is not evident in the chapters in this book, economists and sociologists are increasingly using instrumental variable techniques to help control for selection effects (Foster & McLanahan, 1996).

Selection issues are also a theoretical concern. As pointed out by Barber et al. (chap. 9), some developmental scientists believe that development is a dynamic, synergistic process. Both choosing to participate in an activity and participating are integral to this process—making it difficult, and perhaps inappropriate, to try to separate the influence of those characteristics that lead to participation from the influence of participating itself. Longitudinal fixed effects models are likely the best strategy to capture the inherent complexity of these developmental processes. Person-centered approaches also offer great promise for investigating such complex synergistic systems. Recent efforts to use more person-centered approaches is proliferating, with much of it being done by authors in this book (e.g., the work by Barber et al., chap. 9, this volume; Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Larson et al., chap. 8, this volume; Mahoney, 2000; Stattin and colleagues, chap. 10, this volume, as well as a new volume by Bergman, Magnusson, & El-Khouri, 2003).

Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Evaluation Studies

Randomized trial experimental studies are often considered to be the best way to test causal hypotheses regarding the impact of experiences on development. With the exception of some of the studies summarized in the two chapters on sports and the randomized welfare reform experiments dis-

cussed by Casey et al. (chap. 4), few of the studies reported in chapter 2 through chapter 15 used experimental or quasi-experimental designs. These three chapters clearly illustrate the power of the experimental method for allowing definitive causal inferences. For example, the work summarized in Duda and Ntoumanis (chap. 14) and Scanlan et al. (chap. 13) provides excellent examples of the use of the experimental method to test specific hypotheses about the effects of different types of coaching strategies on young people's experiences in organized sport contexts as well as on the developmental consequences of such experiences. Some of these studies also illustrate the importance of the interaction between contextual characteristics and individual entry level characteristics in determining the likely consequences of participating in organized, competitive sport programs. Finally, some of the studies summarized in these two chapters illustrate the usefulness of training interventions to change the behavior of coaches, thereby changing the experiences of the youth participants. Together these types of studies illustrate the power of a well-development theoretical system to generate well-designed experimental studies to allow the strongest form of causal inference.

The work reviewed by McIntosh et al. (chap. 15) on community service programs also includes experimental studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of this experience on such positive youth developmental outcomes as increased identity clarity, school grades, and commitment to civic engagement in the future, as well as lowered rates of teen pregnancy. However, even in these activity domains, the range of outcomes, experiences, and contextual characteristics assessed and studied is quite limited.

Finally, the work reported by Casey et al. (chap. 4) illustrates a very interesting use of randomized trial policy evaluations. The families in these studies were randomly assigned to either a specific welfare-to-work program or a control group that did not receive the program's package of supports. These families were then studied over time. Information was gathered on both the types of organized activities in which the children participated and a wide array of indicators of development that could be used as outcome variables. The design allowed a definitive conclusion about whether the program had any impact on the participation rates of the children. Then coupling this feature of the design with its longitudinal survey properties, Casey et al. (chap. 4) were able to use the kinds of causal modeling techniques discussed earlier to test hypotheses regarding the impact of participation on the development of these children.

An Alternative View of Best Research Practices

Although experimental and quasi-experimental methods are often considered to be the "gold standard" of research, they can be quite expensive and

difficult to implement. In addition, they may not always be the best method to study the impact of participation in organized activities on human development. In my opinion and in the opinion of many of authors in this book, the best methods for studying the impact of organized activity experiences on human development depend on several factors. Most importantly, the best method depends on the question being asked. The best method also depends on the nature of the "thing" being studied. Studies of organized activities can focus several different levels: For example, they could focus on individual activities such a basketball program or a planning activity in a local chapter of the National Future Farmers of America. Alternatively, they could focus on evaluating or studying the impact of participating in the undefined activities at specific centers such as the youth centers in Sweden. Finally, they could focus on evaluating the general impact of participating in a type of organization that exists in many communities (e.g., participating in Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, or in Boys' Club or Girls' Club). Clearly, organizations such as the youth centers in Sweden and Boys' and Girls' Clubs in the United States contain a wide variety of programs and activities and likely vary in the quality of programming across as well as within sites. The best method of study depends on which of these levels one wants to study as well as the specific questions one wants to answer.

The most comprehensive theories about participation effects typically focus on either the specific nature of the programs or the activities themselves. Most of the chapters in the first two-thirds of this book deal with organized activities at either the individual level or the activity level and most focus on what is going on within those settings that might influence the development of the participants. In addition, most experimental and quasi-experimental studies and program evaluation focus on this level for two major reasons: (a) Programs and activities are simple enough to allow for explicit theories regarding the nature of the impact of the proposed experience on youth development, and (b) programs and activities are small enough to make random assignment to the treatment and control groups possible.

But even studying and evaluating programs within organizations can be quite difficult. Most organized, nonacademic programs are voluntary. Although parents may try to insist that their children attend, their ability to enforce their desires on their children declines as their children move into and through adolescence. In addition, many community organizations for youth include a diverse array of programs from which youth select. Often their selections vary from week to week or day to day, making each individual youth's experiences at the organization quite unique. Furthermore, the quality of their experiences from day to day and from activity to activity within the same center likely varies to a great extent.

Each of these program and organizational characteristics has implications for the experimental study of the impact of participation in organized

activities on development. For example, the voluntary nature of many organized programs creates a problem with selection bias at both the entry and continued participation level. The voluntary nature of joining and attending some types of organized programs can lead to sporadic attendance and high rates of dropping out. Consequently researchers are faced with uncontrolled factors that influence attendance. In this case, rigid adherence to random assignment classification in analyzing one's results is likely to underestimate the programs impact for those participants who are actually exposed to it over an extended period of time.

Similarly, the diverse nature of many organized programs for youth makes exact specification of the treatment problematic. Because individuals can select which parts of the program to attend and how often, the researchers often know little about each individual's exposure to various aspects of the center's programming. Such variation makes it difficult to determine which aspects of the programming are responsible for which developmental outcomes. Finally, the evolving nature of many successful organized programs poses problems for the experimental study of "program effects." Experimental methods usually assume a static linear system. Nonexperimental research on youth programs suggests that the most highly respected and well-attended programs are dynamic—shifting, for example, in response to seasonal activity structures, changing clientele, changing staff, and information derived from ongoing reflective practice and self-evaluation, as well as from the youth themselves (McLaughlin, 2000; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994).

Given these concerns, it is not surprising then that some of most careful studies of extracurricular and other organized youth development programs use either nonexperimental methods or mixed methods in which small experiments are embedded as part of an action research agenda. Also not surprisingly, some of the strongest experimental evaluations of organized programs for youth have been conducted on school-based programs often offered during the regular school hours. Such approaches come close to the new theory-based models of program evaluation (e.g., Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2000; Reynolds, 1998). Given this relation, I want to end this chapter with a brief discussion of this approach to studying the impact of such things as organized activities on human development because of its relevance to designing the next generation of basic studies of the impact of participation in organized out-of-school activities on human development.

Theory-based evaluation acknowledges the importance of substantive theory, quantitative assessment, and causal modeling, but it does not require experimental or even quasi-experimental design. Instead it focuses on causal modeling derived from a well-specified theory of change. First, the researchers, usually in collaboration with the program developers, work out a comprehensive model of change that specifies all of the relations (both me-

diated and moderated relations) among the various contextual characteristics and youth "outcome" characteristics. Often these theoretical models include several layers of hypothesized relations between different aspects of the context as well as between different aspects of the context and youth outcomes. The models lay out a predicted sequence of contextual changes that must occur before one is likely to see changes in youth outcomes. Thus these models propose which contextual features must change first in order to produce changes in other contextual features as well as which contextual features are likely to influence change on which specific youth outcome measures. Finally, these models sometimes specify how characteristics of the youth themselves, as well as of the program personnel, are likely to affect the relations outlined in the general model. For example, the most comprehensive of such models hypothesize differential effectiveness of program characteristics for various groups of youth and program personnel.

Measures are developed and then collected on all of the causal links between contextual or program characteristics and outcome variables. In the best of such designs, these measures are collected over time so that the hypothesized mediational and moderational relations can be tested as the program is implemented. The researchers then use the data collected from these measures to do causal analyses, typically using sophisticated longitudinal data analytic techniques. If the causal modeling analyses indicate that the obtained data are consistent with what the program theory predicts, then the researchers are willing to conclude that the theory is valid and the program is successful for the reasons outlined in the theory.

Very few of the studies reported in the chapters in this book and more generally in the youth program evaluation field use this approach at any more than a superficial level. I believe that we will learn much more about impact of participation in organized activities on human development when we systematically use comprehensive theory-based approaches in both experimental and nonexperimental, longitudinal designs. Finally, to adequately use this approach, it is also essential that we compare the fit of our data with competing theoretical models in order to demonstrate that the model we favor does a better job at explaining the relations obtained than competing theoretical models. Without these comparisons, we really cannot conclude that our model provides the best explanation for the relations obtained.

CONCLUSION

As we move deeper into understanding the impact of out-of-school activities, we will be confronted with the need for greater complexity in our models. This is most evident in the progress that has been made in the sport domain. Like work on school engagement, lots of work has gone into under-

standing the dynamics of youth sport engagement. This is evident in the chapters by Duda and Ntoumanis (chap. 14) and by Scanlan et al. (chap. 13). The questions being asked in these chapters go beyond those being asked in the other chapters, where the focus is on simpler issues, such as does participation relate to one aspect of positive development such as grades or identity and on a few of the most obvious possible mediators. But as is clear in the sport chapters and is beginning to be clear in some of the other chapters, understanding the impact of participating in any type of activity raises many questions dealing with who participates, how long they participate, why do they participate, what they learn while participating, who continues, and how is opportunity to participate influenced by sociocultural and other more macrolevel forces. How do we design experiences to optimize outcomes and what should we be trying to optimize in these experiences? At one level, we want to know if programs work. But work for what end? At a higher level, we want to test fundamental theories about skill acquisition, human motivation, interpersonal interactions, and the impact of social experiences on motivation and engagement and skill acquisition. These questions require different types of studies and different theoretical perspectives.

The chapters in the final section of this book take a slightly different look at organized activities as developmental contexts. They focus on the broader function of community-based programs. As pointed out by Kleiber and Powell (chap. 2), both the public and policymakers now see organized activities as an important part of the services for children and families in the United States. When done well, organized activities can provide a service to working parents, engage youth positively in school and community, promote positive youth development, and bring cohesion across communities, organizations, and families. Some youth advocates think these types of community programs are our hope for the future (see Eccles & Gootman, 2001; Pittman, 1991; Pittman, Tolman, & Yohalem, chap. 17, this volume; Pittman, Yohalem, & Tolman, 2003; Quinn, 1999). The chapters in the last section discuss these issues with great clarity and provide a framework for policymakers interested in creating and supporting community-based programming for youth. The evidence reviewed in chapter 2 through chapter 15 certainly provides empirical support for the likely benefits of such efforts.

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Organized Activities as Contexts of Development

Extracurricular Activities, After-School and Community Programs

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