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Organized Out-of-School Activities: Settings for Peer Relationships

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Adolescents, Organized Activities, and Peers: Knowledge Gained and Knowledge Needed

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Abstract

Borrowing a framework used to study adolescent peer groups, this chapter relates key findings from chapters in this volume to the status or reputation that peers accord a given organized activity, the tendency of activities to channel adolescents toward some relationships and away from others, and the context for peer interactions created within an activity. Then, a conceptual model is presented urging more careful consideration of specific features of a given activity and the peers who participate in them when examining peer effects on activity participants' psychosocial outcomes. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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status, it is also likely that other activities depreciate it, as is deftly depicted in an early scene from John Hughes's classic portrayal of middle-class teenage life in the United States, *The Breakfast Club*.

The linkage between peer status or reputation and participation in an organized activity may be something that adolescents routinely consider in their decisions about joining certain activities. Vest and Simpkins suggest that a motivation for going out for a sports team may be to gain popularity or visibility among peers. Their data do not allow them to test the salience of this motivation directly, but related evidence emerges from the work of Bohnert, Aikens, and Arola (this volume). They reported that continuous involvement in sports teams across the transition to high school increased the number of nominations a student received as a close friend; initiation of involvement in academic activities had the same effect. Enhanced visibility through activity participation may not only affect opportunities for friendship but help establish one's reputation among the much larger set of peers that adolescents typically confront with school transitions.

Bohnert et al. did not find associations between activity participation and adolescents' status (perceived popularity), but this may be because of their focus on activity categories, rather than specific pursuits. In their ethnographic study of one Midwestern middle school, Eder and Kinney (1995) found that sports participation enhanced the status of boys, but the status effects on girls depended on their age as well as the specific sport in which they were involved. This may explain why Eccles and Barber (1999) found that male athletes in their high school tended to identify with the jock crowd, whereas female athletes divided their identification among numerous crowd images—with crowds serving as markers of one's reputation or image among peers.

A lesson to be learned from studies in this volume as well as related research is that an activity's caricature, and its impact on participants' reputations, cannot be considered generic. Activities within a given category may vary in status, and vary further across participants' age or the school setting. For example, the sport accorded the greatest peer status may be basketball in Indiana, wrestling in Iowa, and football in Texas. Bohnert et al.'s call for more careful study of specific activities (rather than general categories such as sports or clubs) and for consideration of the peer status implications of being part of a given activity is very sensible.

To this agenda it would be useful to add some consideration of desistors—individuals who either drop out of an activity voluntarily or who are forced out through a competitive entry process (not making the cut for a team or organization). Do some adolescents decide not to pursue a given activity as they transition to a new school, or as they move through the grade levels in a school, because of the damage that participation could do or is doing to their reputation? Do adolescents who are cut from an activity suffer declines in their visibility or prestige among peers? Generally

speaking, activity dropouts are a remarkably understudied group of adolescents.

Peer status is an important dimension of organized activity involvement, but it is not the only aspect of the caricature of activities. Adolescents also may ascribe a certain set of behaviors or traits to members of a given activity. Stereotypes seem to abound in Hollywood's understanding of teenagers: the dumb jock, sexy cheerleader, geeky math team member, or avant-garde participant of the drama club. Neither the accuracy of these images nor their impact on adolescents' decisions to join an activity is well studied. Once can imagine, however, that in the throes of identity exploration and struggles to fit into a peer group, adolescents may carefully consider how they will be viewed by peers, who will accept or reject them if they were to join an activity. In this way, the caricature feature of organized activities may affect adolescents before they ever actually join an activity, as well as because of their participation.

Channeling Function of Organized Activities

Beyond their role in establishing an adolescent's reputation or level of prestige in the peer group, organized activities can channel a young person toward certain peer relationships and away from others. Proximity remains a key factor in the selection and maintenance of close relationships in adolescence (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Preciado, Snijders, Burk, Stattin, & Kerr, 2012), and it is easily compromised when young people move into a secondary school that encompasses a large number of students drawn from well beyond a student's own neighborhood. The situation is exacerbated when students encounter a new set of peers each instructional period, limiting the amount of time they can interact with any specific age mate. These arrangements make it more challenging for a young person to get to know a peer well enough to initiate a friendship.

Organized activities that meet on a regular basis can provide the adolescent with sustained contact with a circumscribed set of peers who, by virtue of their shared interest in the activity, are good candidates for friendship. This is why adolescents routinely claim that a major benefit of involvement in organized activities is the opportunity to make new friends (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003). Time spent in the activity is time not spent interacting with other peers who are involved in other pursuits. So, activity participation enhances opportunities to form relationships with certain peers (co-participants) while delimiting chances of developing bonds with others (non-participants). If continued proximity is vital to sustaining friendships, then activities that are limited in duration, which is often the case with sports teams that exist only for a portion of a calendar year, may not be instrumental in maintaining a peer relationship. This could explain why Schaefer, Simpkins, Vest, and Price (2011) found that,

For decades, scholars, educators, and policy makers have lauded the potential of organized activities to provide a venue for adolescents to engage in constructive leisure activities, hone their identity, pursue special interests or talents, and gain access to adult mentors and role models (Holland & Andre, 1987; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; McKown, 1927). The chapters in this volume underscore the importance of another, often neglected feature of these activities, namely exposure to potentially influential peers and opportunities to initiate or advance peer relationships. For the most part, research has documented positive effects of organized activity participation in this age group (Feldman & Matjasko, 2012), but there is some evidence of negative outcomes stemming from activity involvement (e.g., Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Vest & Simpkins, this volume), prompting closer attention to just how these activities affect participants. Hopefully, findings from the work of the contributors to this volume will inspire more attention to peer influences and processes, including a stronger effort to sketch the conceptual parameters of the peer dimension in organized activity involvement. In this chapter I offer a conceptual framework through which the contributions in this volume can be highlighted and an agenda for future research can be proposed.

In their overview of research relating peer relations to organized activity involvement, Fredricks and Simpkins (this volume) applied a familiar framework for examining peer issues, considering peer group structure, features of peer relationships, and the nature of peer interactions (see Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). I draw on a different framework (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994) to indicate how key characteristics of organized activities as interaction settings may shape and be shaped by the peer relations of adolescents who participate in the activities. Three fundamental features of the setting emerge from this framework. First, investigators can consider the image or reputation that an activity has within a given peer ecology (school, neighborhood, or community), or the type of identity the activity conveys to participants—in Brown et al.'s (1994) terminology, a *caricature*. An activity's reputation should influence the type of adolescents who are drawn to or repelled from the activity, assuming that young people's decisions about involvement are not driven strictly by the activity itself. Someone skilled at debating, for example, would naturally be drawn to the forensics club, but the decision to join may be heavily influenced by the club's reputation or the "social currency" it carries within the peer system. Second, activities can be examined as *chamels*, directing participants to relationships with particular peers or certain types of peers. Activities may also restrict access to a set of peers, or restrict outsiders' access to participants. Finally, organized activities can be approached as *contexts* for peer interactions. They vary in the type of peer exchanges that are allowed or encouraged and the social skills that are fostered.

These three components of an activity setting can be encompassed in a more comprehensive model of peer dynamics in organized activities. After examining how the studies presented in this volume, along with other research bearing on peer relations, channels, and contexts, I present an organized activities as caricatures, channels, and contexts, I present an expanded conceptual model. I use it to suggest how issues addressed in this volume could be integrated into a more coordinated study of connections between adolescents' involvement in organized activities and their participation in peer culture.

Organized Activities as Caricatures: Implications of Image and Reputation

Part of the tasks of identity development and social adjustment in early adolescence is establishing a reputation among peers. Activity participation can play a role in this process through the reputation that an activity has. If participants in a given activity are expected to behave a certain way or display particular traits, then joining the activity helps to establish one's image among peers, even if the participant does not completely conform to the activity's stereotype (caricature). Two of the chapters in this volume address the issue of activity caricature in terms of popularity or peer status.

Vest and Simpkins begin their chapter for this volume by drawing attention to research findings linking adolescent alcohol use to participation in athletic activities as well as popularity among peers. Although the evidence is modest, there are studies suggesting that popularity, both in terms of peer status and visibility, is associated contemporaneously and over time with higher rates of alcohol use (Balsa, Homer, French, & Norton, 2011; Tucker et al., 2013). Likewise, Vest and Simpkins cite numerous studies reporting associations between drinking levels and sports participation. Based on this work they speculate that drinking may be more extensive among youths who are both popular and out for a sports team because this provides two different contexts that encourage alcohol use. Their findings do not display independent effects of each factor, but this might be because the two are not independent but interdependent. What if the peer status hierarchy was ingrained in the activity program and thereby helped to establish the reputation, or caricature, of a given sport?

This seems to be the case in many U.S. schools and communities, according to several ethnographic studies. Eder and Kinney (1995) and Merten (1996), for example, each describe the prestige accorded to students admitted to the cheerleading squad. Other studies describe the high status that accompanies participation in certain sports teams, especially if one has a leadership role such as being captain or quarterback of the football team (Cusick, 1973; Eckert, 1989). If some activities elevate peer

over time, co-participants in an organized activity were more likely to become friends than individuals who did not share in any activities, even after controlling for homophily and other network characteristics, but co-participation did not affect the likelihood that the relationship continued across time. Unfortunately, Schaefer et al. (2011) did not consider the duration of activity participation, so it is not clear how truncation of an activity affected relationship duration.

Contributors to this volume also found some evidence of channeling effects. Poulin and Denault reported that 70% of activity participants in their data had a friend who was a co-participant. They speculated that having a friend who already is involved in an organized activity may be strong incentive for an adolescent to join the activity, but because their data came from a single time-point they could not test this idea. Their speculation is noteworthy, however, because it points out the possible reciprocal nature of channeling effects: Joining an activity can narrow the field of candidates for future close relationships, but having existing friends interested or already involved in an activity appears to increase the chances that an adolescent will join that activity (Denault & Poulin, 2009b; Fredricks et al., 2002). Having friends as co-participants also seems to diminish the probability that an adolescent will drop out of an activity (Persson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2007). Of course, the opposite dynamic may occur as well: adolescents may be discouraged from joining or persisting in an activity if none of their friends is involved or, worse yet, if they dislike some of the participants.

Channeling effects may be especially important at junctures where relationships are more fragile, such as the transition to a new school. Bohmert et al. (this volume), noted that adolescents who were involved in sports both before and after the transition to high school received a higher number of friend nominations and reported diminishing levels of loneliness, compared to peers with other activity patterns. School transitions feature an unusually high turnover in friendships (Bukowski & Newcomb, 1984; Hardy, Bukowski, & Sippola, 2002), probably because of increased chances of loss of proximity—friends may no longer have classes together and may not see each other so readily in the (typically) much larger new school context. One of the strongest contributions that activity participation can make to a successful school transition is providing a venue for sustaining supportive peer relationships.

Organized Activities as Contexts for Peer Interaction

The channeling function of organized activities is probably more important than investigators have yet realized. Nevertheless, it would not be prudent to regard activities as simply a mating service, helping to bring together certain young people for friendships or other types of close

relationships and discouraging such involvements with other peers. The activities also serve as an ongoing locale for the growth and functioning of peer relationships. Some adult sponsors may attempt to maintain firm control over the nature of interactions among participants, but in most cases, adults and adolescent participants co-create the group's social atmosphere. Because, in most cases, participation in organized activities is voluntary, a matter of personal choice, and because an activity's caricature makes the nature of behavior within the setting easily known, this co-creation process is likely to be more collaborative than adversarial (as it might be in involuntary contexts such as school classrooms). The capacity to influence setting norms or behavior patterns is undoubtedly one of the strongest incentives for adolescents to participate in organized activities.

Evidence of organized activities as a context for peer relations is more extensive than indications of their role as channels or caricatures, both within and beyond this volume. Questions that are highly salient for peer relations are whether or not a given activity or type of activity provides an effective setting for nurturing peer relationships and how setting norms influence the behaviors of friends. Neither chapter that addresses these issues in this volume features longitudinal data, so the insights that they offer must be considered tentative. The findings set the stage for more extensive future research.

A fundamental challenge for researchers examining organized activities as a peer context is determining the appropriate level of analysis. It does not seem defensible to assume that all organized activities create a similar social context, given that they often develop a particular reputation and, as a consequence, tend to attract young people who reflect or aspire to the features of the activity caricature and repel others who are not (or do not want to be) a good match. So, analyses combining participants across many different activities seem ill-advised. But how specific a level of analysis is required? Is it safe to assume that all sports teams or all academic or interest clubs are equivalent contexts, or must each activity be treated as a unique setting? Is it even reasonable to assume that a specific activity—baseball or band or a service club—manifests essentially the same social environment in different schools or communities (allowing participants in such settings to be combined for analyses of national or regional samples)? As yet there is no definitive answer to this question, but it seems prudent to select as specific a level of analysis as possible.

Poulin and Denault (this volume) chart a middle course by examining contextual effects within four moderately specific types of activities: individual sports, team sports, artistic endeavors, and prosocial activities or clubs. They assessed whether the quality and character of friendships were distinctive among these different settings. Because adolescents typically were not involved in different types of activities with different

friends, the investigators could not compare the quality of friendships across settings within individuals. Instead, they looked for setting differences in relationship quality with friends who were co-participants compared to non-participant friends. Differences were subtle, but also inconsistent across activity categories. Adolescents involved in team sports reported more supportive friendships with co-participants than non-participants; the difference was not significant in other activity settings, and in fact approached significance in the opposite direction among those involved in prosocial activities.

There was also evidence of what might be termed selective spillover between behavior in organized activities and other environments. Members of individual sports teams who had co-participating friends reported better school grades than peers who were not involved in this type of activity. Poulin and Denault (this volume) speculated that the competitive environment characteristic of individual sports might have spilled over into the classroom, prompting friends to compete academically as well as athletically and driving up grade point averages. The competitive nature of this activity context might also explain why adolescents in individual sports were less likely to have friends as co-participants than peers involved in other types of activities.

This study does not provide consistent and compelling evidence that organized activity settings create distinctive social contexts whose norms create different patterns of peer relationships that may even extend beyond activity based interactions. Stronger evidence might emerge from analyses focused on specific activities, rather than activity categories. Moore and Werch (2005), for example, found that 8th-grade students' participation in several specific sports was associated with higher alcohol use, whereas involvement in other specific sports correlated with lower use, and the particular teams related to higher or lower drug use differed for males and females. There has also been a spate of studies considering whether sports such as wrestling or football that feature aggressive behavior (efforts to overpower an adversary) tend to instigate or enhance participants' tendencies to act aggressively outside of the activity context. Kreaiger (2007) found evidence supporting this assertion, even after controlling for participants' prior levels of delinquency and aggression; but the association disappeared when the percentage of friends also out for the sport was included in analyses, suggesting that norms among co-participating friends might account for associations between activity characteristics and participants' behavior beyond the activity. The same connection has been reported in other, somewhat less sophisticated studies (e.g., Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

Adolescents are affected not only by the features of an activity context but also by the amount of time they spend in that context. Examining the association between level of sports participation and adolescents' alcohol use, Vest and Simpkins (this volume) found that higher levels of

involvement were associated with closer correspondence between self and friend co-participants' drinking levels. Their measure of involvement was admittedly crude: the number of different sports that respondents indicated they had joined or were planning to participate in over the course of a school year. Assuming, however, that time within the sports context increased directly with the number of teams in which an adolescent was involved, their findings can be interpreted as contextual influences on a young person's behavior. It is also likely that the greater an adolescent's involvement in sports, the less time was available to devote to other organized activities or to unstructured leisure pursuits.

The investigators were especially interested in the degree to which an adolescent's alcohol use matched usage among teammates, who were not necessarily friends, and friends who either were or were not out for sports, though not necessarily teammates. Analyses indicated that the higher the young person's involvement in the sports context, the closer her or his behavior matched that of individuals who shared the general activity setting. This association appeared to be stronger for teammates in general than for friends involved in sports (though not necessarily teammates). Alcohol use matched that of friends not in sports activities to a diminishing degree as level of sports participation increased. A sensible explanation is that increasing time in the sports context decreased time available to spend with friends who were not co-participants, thus also diminishing their influence. Another important aspect of Vest and Simpkins's findings is that adolescents seemed to align with drinking patterns of co-participants, whether this meant relatively low or high use of alcohol.

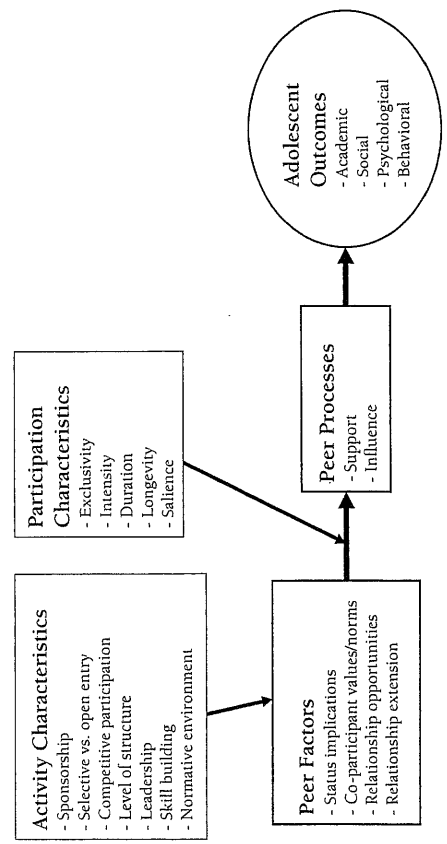
One interpretation of these findings is that adolescents' conformity to the peer norms of an organized activity context is contingent on the amount of time spent in the context or the duration of their involvement. I am reminded of a high school teammate of mine who bemoaned the impending end of our track season, saying he knew he would return to a pattern of smoking and drinking once the season ended and he drifted back to associating with a different set of friends. Peer norms operating within an activity context may heavily shape adolescents' behavior, but at this point the evidence is too modest to draw such a conclusion with confidence. Studies need to focus on a specific activity and follow individuals over time. Like Vest and Simpkins, investigators ought to consider close associates who are not activity mates as well as those who are; ideally, studies should consider multiple contexts if adolescents are involved in more than one organized activity at a time. Tracing adolescents' behavior and pattern of peer relationships before, during, and after the end of participation in an activity would also help to clarify how peer dynamics within the activity itself shaped adolescent behavior and how the nature of the activity context shaped the character of peer relationships that are nurtured in the setting. Behaviors beyond drug use and academic achievement merit more attention.

Beyond Caricature, Channel, and Context: Modeling Peer Influences Through Activity Participation

Although, for the sake of discussion, one can differentiate the role of caricature, channel, and context in the connection between organized activities and peer relations, in reality these elements are intermingled and interdependent. An activity caricature reflects the norms and values expected of interactions in the activity and sets the stage for the types of relationships to be nurtured. Individuals channeled into an activity (in large part by virtue of the activity caricature) bring their interests and relationship expectations—and sometimes their friends—with them, presaging the level of support and types of pressures or expectations that will be provided to co-participants. The three elements fail to capture the full array of factors that affect peer relations and influences within the context of activity participation. A more comprehensive model is needed as a guide for future research.

The model presented in Figure 1 displays key elements that can be used to explore how organized activity characteristics affect peer relationship processes and how these processes, within the context of activity participation, may affect psychosocial outcomes for adolescents. No single study can be expected to capture all of the elements of this model. Instead, it could be used to compare findings among existing investigations and identify gaps in our knowledge to be addressed in future research. A basic assumption of this model is that organized activities have an impact on academic, social, psychological, or behavioral outcomes of adolescents mainly through the peer interactions in which adolescents engage (or are

Figure 1. Conceptual Model to Guide Studies Connecting Peer Factors to Organized Activity Participation



constrained from experiencing) as a function of their involvement in the activity. This is admittedly audacious and myopic because it fails to consider the impact of relationships with adults encountered in activity settings or the consequences of involvement that are not mediated by social relationships—for example, developing skills or experiencing what Larson (2000) referred to as initiative. Bohnert et al. (this volume) mention the possibility that consistent involvement in an activity may provide parents with enhanced opportunities to get to know their child's co-participants and activity advisors, possibly increasing their management of peer influences emanating from the child's involvement. Constructing a truly comprehensive model of the effects of organized activity participation is well beyond the scope of this chapter and this volume.

The conceptual model highlights how peer factors—from status issues to opportunities to form or expand relationships to the quality of peer affiliations—affect peer processes such as social support or patterns of peer influence, which in turn are expected to affect psychosocial outcomes. Characteristics of the organized activity are expected to have direct effects on peer factors that participants experience, whereas features of an adolescent's participation in the activity are expected to moderate the association between peer factors and peer processes. Each component of the model merits some explanation and elaboration, with special attention to the elements concerning organized activities.

Activity Characteristics. A major impediment to progress in studies of organized activities is the lack of consensus on how to categorize activity participation. Most researchers have devised a scheme of grouping specific activities into sensible units for analyses, relying upon the type of action featured in the activity. But the resulting schemes vary considerably among studies, in terms of the number of categories and number of activities within each category, as well as the substance of each grouping. Researchers rarely specify the logic underlying their scheme. Such variability is evident even in the small collection of studies in this volume. Vest and Simpkins confirm their analyses to athletics and treat all sports teams as equivalent—focusing on a simple count of the number of teams in which respondents are involved. Bohnert et al. extend attention to a wider array of activities, settling on a 5-category scheme that includes sports as well as religious, academic, and performing or arts activities, along with clubs or interest groups. Poulin and Denaut settle on a four-category scheme that differentiates individual from team sports and also recognizes artistic activities and clubs or prosocial groups. Poulin and Denaut take the important step of specifying criteria by which something qualifies as an organized activity—including the fact that it involves peer interaction. Only Vest and Simpkins offer some rationale for their scheme. The inclination toward arbitrary groupings of activities undermines efforts to compare study findings, which is essential to advancing an understanding of the effects of participation on young people.

Whereas an effort to reach consensus on a typology of activities would be helpful, attention to the overarching theme of the activity (sports, artistic endeavors, etc.) may actually not be the best approach to understanding the nature of the activity or its impact on participants. An alternative approach is to focus on characteristics most likely to affect the peer environment that arises within the activity.

First among these characteristics is *sponsorship* (see Figure 1). Poulain and Denault differentiate activities that are part of a school from those that are organized and overseen by community organizations. School sponsorship is more common in North America, especially the United States, than many other nations. This system often results in a closer connection between discretionary activities and academic pursuits because the teaching staff may also serve as activity sponsors and participation can be limited to students who maintain a reasonable academic record. However, transportation issues may undermine some students' ability to participate. Studies indicate that African American and Latino youth, as well as offspring from lower SES families, participate in school-based activities at much lower rates than their peers from other ethnic or economic backgrounds (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996), but these same young people are relatively more involved in certain neighborhood-based organizations (Quinn, 1997).

Community sponsorship may arise from organizations already existing in the community (churches, neighborhood centers, youth organizations) or may be formed for the express purpose of sponsoring the activity (e.g., sports clubs). The nature of activity sponsorship is important because it can affect who is channeled into or away from the activity. Adolescents are likely to encounter a different set of peers in activities sponsored within a neighborhood and drawing largely from nearby residents than those organized by a school and open to the entire student body.

A second characteristic is whether membership is *selective or is open to all adolescents*. Selective entry also serves as a channeling device by restricting access to the activity. In some cases—getting a part in the school play, for example—the selection process can create an immediate sense of privilege or accomplishment that can enhance the bonding among participants. In other cases (sports teams, music groups), the selection process can remind participants that they are just one try-out away from dismissal and result in a more guarded, competitive social atmosphere. In either case, the resulting social atmosphere is likely to be different from open-access activities, thus setting the stage for different norms and different types of interpersonal relationships.

Competitive participation, a third characteristic, has already been alluded to, but is not necessarily linked to entry processes. An individual sports team, for example, may welcome all who wish to join but limit participation in sports contests to a select few. Co-participants suddenly become competitors. Poulain and Denault (this volume) speculated that

this feature of individual sports may set the stage not only for the nature of friendship interactions within the activity but beyond it (classroom competition for grades) as well. Competitive participation, often occurring in individual sports, may induce high levels of stress (Scanlan, Babkes, & Scanlan, 2005), which in turn could impede the development of supportive relationships among teammates. In broader terms, the way in which co-participants are expected to relate to each other around the focal activity should help to shape contextual features of peer relationships with—and possibly beyond—the activity.

Activities vary in the *level of structure* that is provided for participants, mostly by adult sponsors. In some cases, there are rigid rules for participation, carefully constructed schedules for each meeting, and close oversight by adults. In other cases the organization is loose and informal. A good illustration of the impact of this activity characteristic comes from Mahoney and Stattin's (2000) examination of community recreation centers for Swedish youth. Open evenings, the centers featured a variety of recreational equipment and activities, with more of a "hanging out" atmosphere including low adult supervision. Such an atmosphere served to channel boys into relationships with deviant peers, exacerbating their delinquent tendencies. By contrast, youth who were involved in structured activities with regular planned meetings and adult supervision displayed fewer associations with deviant peers and less antisocial activity.

A fifth characteristic, *leadership*, often is related to structure. Loosely structured activities, like the community youth centers in Mahoney and Stattin's (2000) study often feature more of a "hands off" approach by adult sponsors in the hopes that youth who might not otherwise consider participation will find the atmosphere more appealing than highly structured activities. These two need not work in tandem, however. Organizations can offer a reasonably structured environment for youth while also encouraging participants to assume leadership roles under the guidance of adults who remain in the background unless circumstances require them to take a more directive role. For example, Boy Scout troops often encourage older members to assume responsibility for running most meetings but at the same time include planning sessions in which adults proactively guide decisions about upcoming events. Coaches can adopt a similar plan, consulting regularly with the team captain but then expecting that the captain will run practices and even make some decisions for the team during athletic contests. This leadership style creates a different dynamic for interpersonal relationships that unfold in the activity context.

Sixth, organized activities vary in the degree to which there is an intentional focus on *building interpersonal skills*. This should not be confused with the activity's focus on building skills related to its focal enterprise (athletic abilities, proficiency at a musical instrument, knowledge of the properties of physics, and so on). At issue is whether the nurturance of social relationships and social skills is a conscious objective. Fredricks and

Simpkins (this volume) refer to quantitative and qualitative evidence that programs designed to enhance participants' social skills led to significant gains in prosocial behavior (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Larson, 2007). These efforts may be more common and explicit in after-school programs for younger adolescents, but adult-activity leaders may try to build in this feature to programs for older adolescents as well. This is an intentional effort to shape the social context of an activity; considerable evidence suggests that it is often successful in achieving this aim.

Last but certainly not least is the normative environment that characterizes an activity. Norms governing social behavior and interpersonal relationships among participants may follow naturally from the attitudes and behaviors that are encouraged by adult sponsors of an activity. Endresen and Olweus (2005) followed early adolescents involved in power sports over a two-year period and found evidence that repeated exposure to macho norms and ideals exacerbated participants' involvement in antisocial behavior, including violent activity, outside the power sports context.

Information about all of these characteristics provides a much stronger basis for hypotheses about the type of adolescents who will be drawn to an activity and the type of social environment they will encounter in the activity context. No doubt, these features also contribute to the reputation that an activity achieves among adolescents. Investigators' decisions about the specific characteristics on which they want to focus can be made on the basis of the theory that underlies their investigation. A major advantage of this approach to organized activities, in contrast to the traditional categorizing schemes, is that it encourages more theoretically grounded research because it encourages direct assessment of specific activity features that may spawn a specific pattern of interpersonal interactions or social relationships.

Peer Factors. The conceptual model regards activity characteristics to be orienting factors that create the context or conditions for specific peer factors that are more directly related to participants' experiences with peers in an activity setting. Peer factors are meant to describe salient characteristics of an activity that affect the dynamics of peer relations. Specific features to highlight in this part of the model are derived from variables already alluded to in the preceding examination of organized activities as caricatures, channels, and contexts for peer relationships and interaction. I illustrate four major peer factors that may be apparent in a wide range of organized activities.

Investigators acknowledge that some organized activities enjoy high *peer status* (Eder & Kinney, 1995; Merten, 1996), but there has been little effort to ascertain why the status or reputation of activities varies, or how peers accord status to activities. Much of the research has concentrated on a few select activities (especially football and cheerleading), on which

there seems to be wide consensus about the activity's status. An important first step might be to determine whether all activities are accorded a measure of status (high or low) or status levels are reserved for just a few marker activities. Understanding how salient activity status is across adolescence would also be useful, as there are some indications that adolescents' preoccupation with peer status fades from early through middle adolescence (Kinney, 1993). This is important because adolescents' decisions about joining an activity may be shaped partly by the peer status implications of participation.

Once these rudimentary questions about activity status have been answered, investigators can turn attention to identifying activity characteristics that contribute to an activity's status ranking. To what extent is the popularity of an activity a function of its key features as opposed to the popularity of its key participants? Does the status of an activity outlive its members? As some adolescents "age out" of an activity and are replaced by younger peers, does the status or reputation of an activity remain stable?

Additional factors of interest would include *co-participant values and norms*, which are central to the social context of the activity. Vest and Simpkins interpret their major findings—that the more sports activities in which adolescents engage, the more their drinking patterns mimic that of their co-participants, whether friends or just teammates—in terms of social learning theory principles. Young people observe a pattern of behavior and its rewards among other peers in the setting, then elect to follow that behavior. The more exposure they receive, the more likely they are to adopt the behavior. Another way of expressing this idea is that peer norms in activity settings are an important component of adolescent behavior. However, it is not yet clear whether certain activity characteristics lead to a more coherent or clearly articulated set of norms. If adolescents enter an activity with a variety of values, beliefs, aspirations, or even expectations of what they will get out of the activity, how does that variety cohere into a dominant set of norms; what activity characteristics contribute to this process?

One conditional factor may be the degree to which the activity provides *opportunities to build new friendships or maintain existing relationships*. Are relationships more likely to form in an activity that features cooperative versus competitive interaction among participants? Does a highly structured environment facilitate or interfere with the formation of close bonds with co-participants? How much more successful at relationship building are activities that consciously attempt to build social skills or encourage close affiliations among participants?

A related factor is *relationship extension*, the degree to which adolescents continue their interaction with co-participants beyond the boundaries of the activity setting. Years ago, Dunphy (1969) found that Australian youth tended to meet each other in organized activity settings such as

church youth groups, and then continued their interactions in informal settings such as beaches or malt shops. The leadership of an activity, either adult sponsors or peer leaders, may consciously attempt to extend interactions beyond formal meetings of the activity in order to build a stronger bond among participants—subscribing to the belief that a team that participates together off the field plays better together on the field. Opportunities for this sort of relationship extension should be related to activity features such as sponsorship. Neighborhood-based activities may offer more opportunities for relationship extension because participants tend to live in close proximity. Participants in school-based activities may have a more difficult time extending relationships that flourish in organized activities unless they share some part of the regular school day (have classes together) or have access to transportation that can overcome their more distal living arrangements.

Poulin and Denault's report in this volume is an important initial effort to assess some of the peer factors contributing to the impact of activity participation on adolescent adjustment. They looked for differences among activity types in the features of adolescents' friendships with co-participants in comparison to friends outside the activity setting. The differences that they noted were limited, but this could be because their comparison groups were based on the type of focal activity (individual sports, artistic pursuits, etc.), rather than the activity characteristics enumerated in the conceptual model.

Participation Characteristics. In some cases, features of the peer environment within an organized activity, or adolescents' success in peer relations form the focus of an investigation (e.g., Bohnert et al., this volume). Others are more concerned with how these factors affect some aspect of adolescent adjustment or behavior (e.g., Vest & Simpkins's concern with alcohol use, or Poulin and Denault's consideration of externalizing, internalizing, and academic achievement). The connection between peer factors and adolescent adjustment is generally thought to be mediated by relationship processes. The two most widely investigated processes are peer influence and peer support. Such processes are delineated in detail in other reports (e.g., Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). In the case of organized activity participation, it is important to consider a set of participation characteristics that can moderate the association between peer factors and peer processes. These characteristics comprise the last major component of the conceptual model.

Several contributors to this volume mentioned that some of their participants were involved in multiple organized activities over the course of a school or calendar year. For Vest and Simpkins, the number of sports teams in which adolescents participated was a primary factor in their analyses. Bohnert et al. considered whether adolescents maintained involvement in the same type of activity across a school transition. These investigations point to one important participation characteristic that

deserves closer attention: *exclusivity* of involvement. Most studies suggest that adolescents, typically, are involved in a limited number of organized activities (often only one or two school-sponsored activities over the course of a year, for example), but researchers also express interest in how breadth of participation (involvement in a variety of different types of activities) may relate to adolescent adjustment. Exclusive involvement in a single organized activity restricts opportunities to form a variety of friendships and enhances the impact of the peer climate within that activity on adolescent adjustment and behavior.

Denault and Poulin (2009a) reported that, over time, adolescents tended to become more exclusive in their pattern of organized activity participation. This could be because, with increasing age, activities demanded more time or attention from participants, making it impossible for them to remain involved in a variety of organized pursuits. However, *intensity* of involvement (amount of time devoted to activities) also declined across adolescence. This is important because, as was intimated in Vest and Simpkins's findings, more intense involvement in a single activity environment (or type of environment) increased the chances that adolescents would adhere to peer norms (from teammates or co-participating friends) in that setting.

Other participation characteristics, often neglected by researchers, may also modify the capacity of peers in an activity setting to influence adolescent outcomes. They include the *duration* of an activity (whether it is confined to a portion of a year, as is typical of seasonal sports, or continues throughout the year), *longevity* (how many years adolescents continue involvement in an activity, as was addressed in Vest and Simpkins's report in this volume), and perhaps most importantly, the *salience* of the activity (how central to their lives and sense of self adolescents considered the activity).

Using the Model. The conceptual model helps to underscore the impressive array of issues that contributors to this volume have addressed in attending to peer factors in adolescents' organized activity involvement. It provides a means of connecting these diverse issues and suggesting variables that deserve closer consideration in future research. The model underscores the fact that achieving a comprehensive understanding of the role of peers in adolescent activity involvement is a daunting task. Yet, through a comprehensive model such as the one presented here, it is possible to derive a more coordinated agenda for future research.

Conclusion

The investigations presented in this volume underscore the importance of peer dynamics within and surrounding organized activities to the consequences of adolescents' activity involvement. The authors illustrate the

need to approach this issue from multiple perspectives and the relevance of diverse theoretical frameworks to investigations of peer factors. Although it is convenient to approach activities in terms of the focal event that they showcase (athletics, musical performance, community service, etc.), this may not be the most useful feature for understanding peer processes fomenting within an activity. Approaching organized activity involvement from the perspective of peer-relevant characteristics offers a promising alternative to most current research on this topic. More systematic attention to these factors may not only aid our understanding of peer dynamics that underlie the effects of organized activity involvement on adolescent adjustment, but they also may aid in designing activity environments more conducive to healthy adolescent development. This in itself is only a first step, as the most adaptive peer and activity environments probably vary as a function of both individual and cultural characteristics. Yet, taking such a step seems vital to building on the impressive insights about peer factors that are provided by the studies showcased in this volume.

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