Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Organized After-School Activities: Taking a Closer Look at Participation of Ethnic Minority Youth

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ABSTRACT—Youth participation in organized after-school activities provides opportunities for positive growth and development. Unfortunately, ethnic minority youth, especially those living in low-income communities, participate in these activities at lower rates and less consistently than nonminority youth. This article reviews the research on the academic, psychological, and behavioral outcomes of participation in organized activities for African American and Latino youth. Second, it highlights individual and contextual factors associated with these youth’s initial and ongoing participation. It concludes by outlining the gaps in the literature on ethnic minority youth and articulates areas that require additional theory and research.

KEYWORDS—extracurricular activities; after-school programs; ethnic minority youth

The growth in numbers of single-parent and dual-earner families has left millions of children unsupervised after school. Research has illustrated the increased risk behaviors and poorer outcomes for youth who spend this time in unstructured and unsupervised settings (Newman, Fox, Flynn, & Christeson, 2000; Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Meece, 1999). There is a growing interest in the potential of participation in organized after-school activities to promote positive youth development (PYD; e.g., Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005). Organized activities include a range of adult-sponsored activities that fall outside of the regular school curriculum and include school-based extracurricular activities including sports, arts, and school clubs; community-based youth programs like the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs; and after-school programs outside of schools. There have been significant increases in government and foundation funding to support organized activities in low-income areas and low-performing schools (Pittman, Tolman, & Yohalem, 2005).

The after-school hours are ideal for providing students with support for youth development and access to experiences that they often lack during the school day (Khane et al., 2001). Many aspects of organized activities are linked to PYD, including physical and psychological safety, supervision and guidance by unrelated adults, contact with prosocial peers, support for efficacy, and opportunities for skill building (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, 2000). Participation in organized activities, especially those with an academic focus, can also supplement learning during school and provide targeted assistance to students who need more help than they can receive in the classroom or at home (Halpern, 1999).

Several recent reviews address whether participation in organized activities is associated with positive adjustment (e.g., Bohnert, Fredricks, & Randall, 2010; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009). These authors summarize whether the outcomes associated with participation varied along several key aspects, such as level of participation and type of organized activity. However, they did not critically examine activity participation for ethnic minority youth. In fact, ethnic minority youth have been understudied in the organized activity literature as a whole. Furthermore, very few international studies exist on children’s organized activity participation, and much of this work has focused on White youth and has not taken a cultural perspective (e.g., Blomfield & Barber, 2009; Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Denault & Poulin, 2009). Thus, our goal is to critically review the research on organized activities for African American and Latino youth in the United States by describing the evidence that these activities promote PYD.
outlining the factors associated with both initial and ongoing participation, and articulating areas that require additional theory and research.

**ECODEVELOPMENTAL THEORY**

Ecodevelopmental theory can inform the research on organized activity participation among ethnic minority youth (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). This theory extends Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2000) by emphasizing the factors that promote resilience among these youth. According to ecodevelopmental theory, youth are embedded within multiple, nested settings including immediate settings, such as organized activities, and more distal ones with which youth do not come into direct contact, such as parents’ work environments. It views youth as active agents who influence their immediate settings. Families are particularly important because they influence youth’s involvement in other immediate settings, such as organized activities. Macro factors, such as ethnicity, cultural norms, and immigration, trickle down the various nested settings to shape development. For example, youth will likely participate in particular organized activities on the basis of their ethnicity, culture, and experiences with immigration. Furthermore, the impact of an organized activity on youth’s development is shaped by these macro factors.

**OUTCOMES OF ORGANIZED ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION**

Ecodevelopmental theory posits that youth’s engagement in micro settings, like organized activities, will shape their development. Although the theory does not articulate the explicit mechanisms, it holds that these micro settings promote resilience and PYD, such as building youth’s self-esteem and supporting their academic achievement. Although much of the existing literature on youth outcomes associated with participation does not consider ecodevelopmental theory, research generally supports its theoretical claims.

The existing research on the outcomes associated with ethnic minority youth’s participation in organized activities incorporates findings from three types of research designs: (a) community-based studies of ethnic minority youth who participate in several different types of activities (sports, academic clubs, arts) and who made up at least two thirds of the sample, (b) studies using data from nationally representative data sets that have examined differential effects by race, and (c) evaluations of specific after-school programs that serve a large percentage of ethnic minority youth or serve communities where most children are minorities. We used these three designs to organize our literature review in order to highlight their methodological differences and theoretical insights.

It is important to note that most studies on African Americans’ and Latinos’ organized activities has defined their samples in terms of youth’s racial/ethnic affiliation, often using racial/ethnic affiliation and culture interchangeably. Furthermore, many include a large proportion of low-income ethnic minority youth and often equate low socioeconomic status (SES) with ethnicity. Although ecodevelopmental theory and scholars suggest that racial/ethnic affiliation, culture, and SES (or a combination of those processes) will uniquely shape participation and the associated youth outcomes, only a few studies have examined these possibilities.

**Community-Based Studies**

In both childhood and adolescence, organized activity participation has been correlated with positive academic, psychological, and social adjustment for both low-income and middle-class African American youth (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2007; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006, 2008, 2010; Posner & Vandell, 1994, 1999; Quane & Rankin, 2006; Simpkins, Eccles, & Becnel, 2008). In addition, organized activity participation among African American adolescents has been associated with lower drug and alcohol use and antisocial behavior (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Pederson & Seidman, 2005). Although the strength of the associations from the five longitudinal studies (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006, 2008, 2010; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Simpkins et al., 2008) was a little smaller than those from the cross-sectional studies, the consistency in findings and the fact that several of them also included numerous selection factors provide confidence in the relation between participation and adjustment.

Although it is more limited, the existing correlational research with Latinos suggests that participation is also associated with PYD. In cross-sectional studies, participation in organized activities is correlated with school bonding and retention among Mexican adolescents (Diaz, 2005) and Latinos in a rural community (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999). Longitudinal studies of community-based programs in largely low-income communities with many immigrant families suggest that Latino children’s and adolescents’ participation predicts subsequent self-esteem, social behavior, emotion regulation, and ethnic identity (Morrison, Storino, Robertson, Weissglass, & Dondero, 2000; Riggs, 2006; Riggs, Bohmert, Guzman, & Davidson, 2010), which are important for Latino adolescents’ ability to cope with negative experiences like discrimination (Umana-Taylor, Vargas-Chanes, Garcia, & Gonzales-Backen, 2008).

**Nationally Representative Data Sets**

Other researchers have used nationally representative data sets to examine the differential effects of extracurricular participation in high school on adjustment across broad racial/ethnic groups. Marsh and colleagues found that extracurricular participation predicted higher academic and psychological adjustment for all racial groups after adjusting for multiple self-selection factors (Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). In contrast, other studies have found that the positive relation between organized activity participation and adjustment does not hold for some racial
groups. For example, participation in sports has been linked to achievement and educational mobility for White youth, but not for African American and Hispanic youth (e.g., Hanson & Kraus, 1998; Melnick, Sabo, & Vanfossen, 1992; Sabo, Vanfossen, & Melnick, 1993). In contrast, nonsport extracurricular participation had a protective effect on subsequent well-being for Hispanic adolescents, but not for White or African American adolescents (Hull, Kilborne, Reece, & Husaini, 2008).

One potential reason for this inconsistency is that researchers have largely placed youth with the same racial/ethnic affiliation into a single group. A recent cross-sectional study suggests that sports participation was associated with higher self-esteem because sports predicted high school attachment and physical well-being for Mexican boys and girls, Puerto Rican girls, and Cuban boys, but not for Puerto Rican boys or Cuban girls (Erkut & Allison, 2002). The authors speculated that some of these differences may have emerged because of macro factor influence, namely culture and gender expectations, which aligns with ecological developmental theory.

Evaluations of Specific After-School Programs
Other research has examined the effects of participating in specific after-school programs that serve a range of ethnic groups. As a result of the No Child Left Behind Act, much of this research has focused on how participation affects academic achievement. Several studies of low-income ethnic minority youth attending high-quality elementary and middle school after-school programs have shown that participation predicts higher academic achievement and lower school dropout rates (Huang, Gibbons, Kim, Lee, & Baker, 2000; Huang, Kim, Marshall, & Pérez, 2005; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). In contrast, evaluations of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers and San Francisco Beacons, which serve a high proportion of ethnic minority youth, suggest that participation is unrelated to academic achievement (United States Department of Education, 2003; Walker & Arbreton, 2004).

Although most of the research has focused on the academic outcomes of participation, there is evidence that involvement in after-school programs for low-income and ethnic minority youth is related to psychological and social adjustment, which is predictive of youth’s academic success. Participation has been linked to higher self-esteem, social behaviors, and peer acceptance, as well as reduced negative behaviors like aggression and drug use (Durrlak & Weissberg, 2007; Mason & Chuang, 2001; Morrison et al., 2000). In addition, participation in after-school programs, those with an athletic focus, has been linked to lower obesity levels for African American and Latino youth (Madsen et al., 2009).

Summary
The findings were generally consistent across the three types of studies. Organized activity participation in both childhood and adolescence was associated with positive academic, psychological, and social adjustment. The one difference across the studies was that the relation between participation and academic achievement was less consistent in the after-school evaluations, which may reflect methodological differences. One challenge in assessing organized activity participation is how to account for self-selection effects, as participants often differ from nonparticipants on a range of demographic, individual, and family factors before enrollment. Many of the after-school evaluations used either randomization or nonrandomization techniques to match participants to a control group. In contrast, the studies in the community-based and nationally representative data sets used correlational data and varied in the extent to which they adjusted for self-selection factors and included covariates in their models. The highest quality correlational studies used longitudinal designs and included a range of covariates that help differentiate participants from nonparticipants (e.g., see Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Thus, it is possible that the weaker findings for academic achievement in the after-school evaluations are a result of using methodological techniques that are able to more effectively eliminate differences between participants and nonparticipants. However, it is also important to note that findings from the 21st Century Evaluation have been controversial because of possible methodological flaws (Mahoney & Zigler, 2006).

The pattern of findings across these three types of studies has implications for ecological developmental theory. These studies suggest that micro settings, like organized activities, can promote resilience and positive development in ethnic minority youth. Moreover, some studies suggest that the outcomes associated with participation may vary for subgroups within broad racial/ethnic groups. This aligns with the notion that participation in activities and the related outcomes will vary on the basis of macro factors, such as ethnicity. Future studies need to consider other macro factors and whether the particular macro factors are important in shaping particular outcomes, such as whether the macro factor of language affects the extent to which activity participation shapes academic achievement.

It is also important to consider age and type of activity when interpreting these findings. Youth are active agents who select organized activities and shape how activities influence their development. The community-based and nationally representative studies largely included adolescents, whereas the after-school program evaluations studied children (ages 5–12). Adolescents’ participation may have been more consistently associated with PYD because youth play a stronger role in selecting their activities as they age (Savage & Gauvain, 1998).

It is also important to note that these age differences are confounded with the type of activity. After-school programs in the program evaluation section often have many components and provide consistent after-school care several days per week. In contrast, the studies in the community-based section and national data sets are often based on adolescents’ participation in a specific type of activity, like arts or sports. The activities of adolescents may also be more consistently related to positive

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adjustment because many of these activities focus on a specific aspect of the self, like general self-esteem or a sense of belonging, which can have implications for youth more broadly.

HOW TO DESIGN PROGRAMS TO SUCCESSFULLY RECRUIT AND RETAIN YOUTH

Sustained participation in an organized activity is critical for positive outcomes (Bohnert et al., 2010). Thus, it is important to better understand how to recruit and retain ethnic minority youth. In this section, we use ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik & Coatswork, 1999) to review the factors that promote participation among African American and Latino youth.

Several studies that have focused on selection for ethnic minority youth have examined differences in participation across broad racial/ethnic groups. African Americans tend to participate more in sports, church-based activities, and before- and after-school programs, but less in student government and Scouting than Whites (Bouffard et al., 2006; Darling, 2005; Jordan & Nettles, 2000; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Multiple studies suggest that Latinos, on average, are less likely than non-Latinos to participate in a variety of organized activities (e.g., Darling, 2005; Davalos et al., 1999; Pedersen & Seidman, 2005). Although these findings have been replicated across data sets with different samples of ethnic minority youth, they focused on comparing broad racial/ethnic groups rather than examining the variability within any single group. Ecodevelopmental theory postulates that differences in SES, cultural orientation, and immigration will predict differences in participation among youth who share the same racial/ethnic affiliation. A recent study based on the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health supports this by suggesting that there was great variability in participation within each of the four largest Latino ethnic groups based on markers of cultural orientation (Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Central/South American; Simpkins, O’Donnell, Delgado, & Becnel, 2011). For example, foreign-born Cubans were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities than U.S.-born Cubans, but having many foreign-born and coethnic friends was related to lower participation among Cubans. The influence of macro factors on participation is likely to filter through youth’s interests and the family.

Because organized activities are voluntary settings and youth are theorized to play an active role in selecting them, it is important to understand which activities youth prefer. Research suggests that youth often select activities they find interesting and think they are good at (Pearce & Larson, 2006). Recent qualitative work suggests that youth’s opinions about appropriate and valuable uses of their time after school vary with immigration status. First- and second-generation Latino adolescents showed stronger preferences for organized activities that help with job and life skills than their third-generation Latino peers (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005). Qualitative studies suggest that adolescents want to be in a place that feels like home or where they can spend time with their friends (e.g., Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010; Hirsch, 2005; Loder & Hirsch, 2003). Ecodevelopmental theory suggests that which settings make people feel comfortable may depend on their immigration status and ethnicity. For example, Menjivar’s (1997) work suggests that Salvadoran and Mexican immigrants often rely on trusted friends and institutions, such as the church, for assistance.

According to ecodevelopmental theory, researchers must also consider how children’s activity participation fits within the family system (Szapocznik & Coatswork, 1999). The most heavily researched family predictor of participation is SES. As expected, research suggests that children from high-SES families are more likely to participate in after-school activities than are children from low-SES families (e.g., Dearing et al., 2009; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Wimer et al., 2003). Having a limited income can create barriers, as poor communities have fewer activities available (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Quiroz, 2000; Shann, 2001). However, recent work suggests that markers of cultural orientation, like nativity, were more important predictors of participation in school-based activities than family SES for Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Central and South American adolescents (Simpkins et al., 2011). Future research should seek to understand how families affect participation beyond SES, particularly with an eye to family strengths and supports.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our review identifies several gaps in this literature and points to promising future directions. Each of these future directions calls for scholars to move away from general comparisons and to design theoretically grounded studies that account for the backgrounds and needs of youth from specific ethnic groups defined by race, ethnicity, cultural orientation, SES, and immigration.

First, previous research has used a limited range of samples. Most of it has been conducted with community-based samples of low-income African American and Latino youth, with limited research on other ethnic groups, ethnic minority youth in middle-class families, or international comparisons. Furthermore, it has largely described patterns for African Americans or Latinos as single homogenous groups. Researchers have rarely examined the rich heterogeneity within any single pan-ethnic or racial group in terms of specific ethnic groups defined by race, ethnicity, cultural orientation, SES, immigration, and cultural orientation or how each of these macro factors influences development (Quintana et al., 2006).

Second, scholars have paid little attention to differences in the effects of organized activity participation by activity type, quality, and age of participants. Future studies must more carefully link outcome measures to the type of after-school activity. The program quality of organized activities also varies, but much of the existing work on program quality has focused on the same indicators for all.
youth and has assumed a “one program fits all” model. Although particular aspects—such as safety—of program quality are important for all youth, other indicators may vary depending on youth’s background. Research on parenting style suggests that the optimal parenting style for child development varies with cultural expectations (Chao, 2001). It is possible that different types of leadership or indicators of quality, such as an environment that is respectful of diverse backgrounds, may be particularly important depending on youth’s background. Finally, future studies should examine whether participation serves different developmental functions at different ages. Younger children may thrive in an environment supervised by caring adults with enriching and skill-building activities, whereas adolescents may need relationships with peers and opportunities to participate in meaningful and challenging tasks. Qualitative research exploring characteristics of these programs can begin to address these questions. Larson and his colleagues have begun examining these questions in an intensive qualitative study of the developmental processes occurring in exemplary youth programs (see, e.g., Larson & Brown, 2007; Larson & Walker, 2006).

Third, culture, immigration, and race/ethnicity are largely absent from theories of PYD, the theoretical framework most common in the out-of-school literature (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). Instead, much of the out-of-school research on diverse populations has assumed that theories applied to middle-school samples of predominantly White children are applicable to other groups. Ecodevelopmental theory can complement PYD perspectives by providing guidance on which macro factors warrant consideration as well as broadly suggesting how these factors might influence development (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). However, more work is needed on the specific mechanisms by which macro factors shape development, and future studies must disentangle the unique influence of these macro factors (Quintana et al., 2006). Given the limited work on these issues in organized activities, mixed-methods approaches might be particularly fruitful for theory generation and testing. For example, research on the characteristics of community-based programs that have an established track record for retaining ethnic minority youth may be particularly informative to understanding optimal practices for youth from various groups defined by macro factors (Kauf, 2010; McLaughlin, 2000; Stroebel, Kirshner, O’Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008).

Fourth, most studies have focused on broad indicators of adjustment, such as GPA and self-esteem, without considering outcomes that may be particularly relevant to ethnic minority youth. For example, organized activities have the potential to support children’s connections with both the culture of their homeland and mainstream American culture. Foreign-born children can use organized activities as a mechanism to explore possible identities in the United States, explore their own ethnic identity, and learn about other ethnic groups. Furthermore, organized activities may be particularly helpful in supporting and extending families’ social capital. Church-based activities, for example, can support families’ connections to the church and religiosity. Activities can extend immigrant families’ social capital by providing youth with positive adult role models (Roffman, Suarez-Orozco, & Rhodes, 2003) or provide families with information on the U.S. school system. To be most effective, organized activities must consider and build on the strengths of ethnic minority youth and their families (see, e.g., Warfield-Coppock, 1992).

CONCLUSION

This article complements the existing work on organized activities in two important ways. First, we describe the outcomes of organized activity participation for African American and Latino youth. Second, we review the individual and contextual factors that support both initial and ongoing participation of African American and Latino youth, which previous studies have ignored. Both pieces of information are vital to assess whether organized after-school activities are a viable option to promote the positive development of ethnic minority youth.

REFERENCES


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