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## **Adolescents' Negative Experiences in Organized Youth Activities**

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**Abstract:** Research indicates that organized youth activities are most often a context of positive development. However, there is a smaller body of evidence suggesting that these activities are sometimes a context of negative experiences that may impede learning or lead to dropping out. To better understand negative experiences in youth activities, we conducted ten focus groups with adolescents. Youths' descriptions provide an overview of the range of types of negative experiences they encountered, as well as how they responded to them. The most frequent types of negative experiences involved peers and peer group dynamics and aversive behavior attributed to the adult leaders of the activities. The youth described two types of responses to their negative experiences - a passive response of feeling negative emotions, and active coping, which sometimes led to learning.

### Introduction

Research increasingly shows that organized youth activities, such as extracurricular activities and community based youth programs, are a context of positive development for adolescents (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Mahoney, Larson & Eccles, 2005). Yet there is also evidence – of a less complete nature – that these activities are sometimes a context of negative experiences. Studies suggest that participation in sports can lead to increased alcohol use (Eccles & Barber, 1999) and that participation in both music and sports can create adverse levels of stress (Scanlan, Babkes, & Scanlan, 2005; Smoll & Smith, 1996). Research on Swedish youth centers suggests that peer interactions in these contexts can reinforce negative norms and behavior patterns (Mahoney, Stattin, & Magnusson, 2001; Stattin, Kerr, Mahoney, Persson, & Magnusson, 2005). And there is evidence that some adults in organized programs act in ways that promote inappropriate behavior or have a negative influence on young people's sense of self and faith in others (Eder & Parker, 1987; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). The present investigation was designed to identify and begin to categorize the range of adolescents' negative experiences in youth activities.

Our framework for this investigation conceptualizes negative experiences as experiences that disrupt the processes of positive development within organized youth activities. Most scholars working in this area agree that engagement is the critical vehicle of positive development. This includes psychological engagement in which youth are challenged, motivated, and devote deep attention to being successful in the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Larson, 2000), and through which they become active producers of their own development (Lerner, 2004; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981; Silbereisen, Eyferth, & Rudinger, 1986). This also includes engagement in relationships. Developmental systems theory posits that positive development occurs in and through a young person's participation in meaningful relationships (Lerner, 2002, 2004). In youth programs this can include engagement with supportive and caring adult leaders (Halpern, 2005; Rhodes, 2004), engagement in positive collaborations with peers (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003), and engagement with community adults who provide various forms of support and social capital (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005).

Negative experiences are important to understand because they can interfere with these different forms of positive engagement. A youth who is upset, distressed, or angered by an event in a program is less likely to be psychologically engaged and to devote attention to learning. Emotion researchers recognize that one of the functions of negative emotion is typically to shift attention from long-term goals such as development, toward immediate concerns of safety and well-being (Clore, 1994). In situations when a negative experience in a program occurs at the same time as a young person is experiencing other negative events, it can contribute to a "pile up" of stress; and we know from a large body of research that youth who experience multiple simultaneous stressors are more likely to become depressed, use substances, or manifest other problems (Chassin, Husson, Barrera, Molina, Tim, & Ritter, 2004; Garber, 2004), all of which sidetrack developmental processes.

Similarly, negative experiences may disrupt engagement in important developmental relationships within an organized activity. A recent National Academy of Sciences report identified eight features that make youth programs contexts of positive development:

- physical and psychological safety,
- appropriate structure,
- supportive relationships,
- opportunities for belonging,
- positive social norms,
- support for efficacy and mattering,
- opportunity for skill building, and
- integration of family, school, and community efforts.

All eight features are factors that are influenced by adult leaders (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Negative experiences with an adult leader are likely to interfere with the adult's ability to shape these features. Research on mentoring and youth sports suggests that a single negative experience with a mentor or coach often has proportionally more influence on that relationship than a single positive experience (Rhodes, 2002; Smoll & Smith, 1996). Likewise, conflict with peers can reduce the learning that might occur within collaborative peer relationships (Larson et al., 2005), and the same could be said for interactions with community members.

Negative experiences can also lead youth to drop out of organized activities, and totally disengage from learning in this context. Research on youth sports shows that performance

anxiety can lead youth to drop out (Scanlan et al., 2005). Studies of youth in other organized activities also suggest that negative experiences contribute to youth dropping out (Hultzman, 1993; Patrick, Ryan, Alfred-Liro, Fredricks, Hrudu, & Eccles, 1999).

Given the potentially disruptive effects of negative experiences on youth's engagement in programs, they need to be a significant topic of study. Knowledge of the variety of negative experiences that youth encounter and their consequences is essential to evaluating and ultimately to improving youth programs (Dubas & Snider, 1993). Since the current knowledge on negative experiences is sparse and unsystematic, we felt that it was essential to begin by listening and documenting the range of negative experiences that youth report in organized activities. Our choice to focus on youth's own open-ended accounts was based on two premises; first, that understanding the reality that people experience is important in its own right (Patton, 1990; van Manen, 1984), and second, that youth's conscious appraisals of their experiences in an activity influence their engagement in the activity and their decision to remain in it.

To identify the range of young people's negative experiences, the present investigation utilized focus group interviews. Focus groups are one approach to group interviews that utilize group dynamics to elicit detailed information (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Focus group methodology is designed to create a non-threatening environment that promotes self-disclosure. Although the data obtained in group interviews can be influenced by social desirability (Krueger, 1988), youths' experiences in organized activities often emerge and are given voice through interactions with others (Patrick et al., 1999; Rogoff, Baker-Sennet, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995). Thus, the dynamic of focus groups is well suited to eliciting young people's accounts of the variety of negative experiences they encounter in this context.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Ten focus groups were conducted with 4-9 adolescents in each. A total of 55 adolescents (23 boys and 32 girls) participated. Six focus groups were conducted in the high school of an ethnically diverse mid-sized Midwestern town. School counselors selected students to participate who were active in school activities and whom they thought would be articulate. In order to be certain to be inclusive of community-based youth organizations, three additional focus groups were formed from members of a community-based arts program, an FFA chapter, and a service-learning, leadership organization for high school women, primarily African American, sponsored by a university sorority. One additional focus group was also formed from student volunteers at a university high school. This use of purposeful sampling resulted in focus groups that were representative of young people who were or had been actively involved in activities.

The focus groups planned through the high schools were conducted during the school day, in the school building. The focus groups formed from community-based organizations were conducted during the groups' regular meeting time, either at their regular meeting location or in the researchers' lab. The focus groups were mixed gender, age, and race, whenever not restricted by the demographics of the population (e.g., for the community groups). These youth had a mean age of 16 years (range 14-18). Twenty-two percent of the participants identified themselves as African American, 18% identified as bi-racial, 4% identified as Asian, and just over half (56%) of the participants identified themselves as White.

## Procedures

Prior to participating in the focus group, youth completed a brief background questionnaire: providing information on their age, gender, the activities they were involved in, and how often they participated in each. Youth activities were defined to include school-based extracurricular activities, community-based youth organizations, and all organized activities and programs for youth that are both voluntary and structured (Larson, 2000). These youth were highly involved in a variety of activities; 83% were involved in a club or organization, 60% were involved in performance or fine arts, and 72% were involved in sports.

One of the authors or a trained graduate student was the moderator for each focus group. The moderator followed a semi-structured interview guide, designed to get the students to describe their specific negative experiences in youth activities. To establish rapport, the focus group began with open-ended, descriptive questions aimed at getting all students involved and talking about their experiences in organized activities (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Engaging each participant helps establish a common base for sharing, and makes it easier for participants to speak again (Krueger, 1988).

Following this rapport-building stage, the moderator first asked participants to describe the types of growth and learning experiences they had in youth activities. The results of these data are reported elsewhere (Dworkin, Larson, & Hanson, 2003). Next, youth were asked to describe the types of negative and "bad" experiences they have had in organized youth activities. After students' spontaneous descriptions of negative experiences were exhausted, five probes were used to help identify additional negative experiences that had not spontaneously emerged. These probes asked about types of experiences that have been mentioned in other studies: negative group interactions, negative peer influences, negative interactions with adults, stress, and discovering something about yourself you did not like. We encouraged youth to give specific examples of negative experiences, however, in the flow of the conversation they also identified generalized experiences, using language suggesting that they had encountered them more than once and believed that other youth also had these experiences (e.g., "Sometimes you fail, and you don't want to do anything again or try anything new."). The focus group sessions lasted 45 to 60 minutes, with approximately one-third of each focus group session dedicated to talking about youths' negative experiences. The focus groups were tape recorded.

## Data Analysis

The focus group transcripts were coded to identify recurrent themes and categories of negative experiences (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Codes were developed from the focus group transcripts (Charmaz, 1988). Consistent with a phenomenological perspective, these data were analyzed under the assumption that the data provided by participants correspond to their actual experiences and to the meanings they apply to these experiences. In addition, interpretation of the data included distinguishing between youth's statements that were made spontaneously and those elicited in response to the probes. We used NVivo, a computer program, to assist with the coding and sorting of the data (Richards, 1999).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, noting salient features such as long pauses and laughter. To preserve participant confidentiality, the interviews were transcribed using pseudonyms and eliminating any identifying information. To ensure accuracy, the transcripts were then carefully checked against the tapes. Next, open coding was used to identify themes, patterns, and concepts in youths' spontaneous descriptions of their negative experiences. Every

event and idea of a given phenomenon was named. We determined that these negative experiences most readily categorized in two ways - according to the person or persons portrayed as the source of the negative experience (e.g., peers, adult leaders, oneself), and by the way in which the youth responded to the negative experience (e.g. a passive response of feeling negative emotions, active coping). Then we coded students' responses to our interview probes. We found that these responses fit into the two larger categories already identified. As a final step, axial coding, a more intense form of coding used to identify properties of domains that emerged during open coding (Strauss, 1987), was used to identify the types of negative experiences related to each category of person and the types of responses to negative experiences. Through this process, themes within these broader categories emerged.

The categories that emerged from students' descriptions of their experiences are described in the following sections. Given that multiple responses to an item were sometimes provided by members of the same focus group, sometimes in response to each other, we did not feel it was useful to provide counts of the frequency with which different categories were reported. On reporting the results below, we indicate that a category was frequent, only when it was reported by multiple youth across multiple focus groups. In addition, the categories are exemplified by direct quotes from students (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Types of Negative Experiences**

Students identified five categories of persons portrayed as the sources of their negative experiences – peers, adult leaders, themselves, parents, and community members. Axial coding revealed the types of negative experiences related to each category of persons.

#### **Peers**

The largest number of negative experiences was attributed to peers and to peer group dynamics within the activity. First the students described encounters with aversive peer behavior. A boy in FFA held the position of Historian and had the role of recording all the activities of the chapter. He complained that "the members will start getting mad at you and start erupting at you." The authoritarian style of youth in leadership roles was a commonly reported aggravation. A student in a theater production reported that the student directors of the play "get all up in your face and mad." Unsportsmanlike behavior was another aversive behavior that students identified. A girl reported quitting the basketball team because other team members played too aggressively, "They didn't even try to go after the ball, they were just trying to hurt somebody. It wasn't about basketball." These frequent reports of aversive behavior may stem from the nature of the activities, demands created by competition, or from the fact that youth activities often bring adolescents into contact with peers with whom they would not have otherwise chosen to affiliate.

A second type of negative experience was the formation of cliques and exclusive friendship groups among participants in the activity. These made interactions difficult and led to some youth being left out. A male cheerleader described his experiences: "They all got their little cliques, like three or so stay together, and then, if you go and talk to one group or another group you're favoring somebody." A girl in track reported that group divisions had created a situation in which, "No one wants to have fun in practice, and the coach is always stressed out because everyone has a problem with everyone else. So, it's hard to do what you're supposed to be doing."

Third, and interrelated with these experiences, youth described poor cooperation as another category of negative peer experiences. They reported frustrations with the lack of synergy within the entire group and between individuals. Disruptions in teamwork were attributed to personality clashes and to people procrastinating or not doing their part. One girl said, "When somebody didn't show up or didn't get a task done, it kind of left the rest of us hanging." A boy working on the yearbook staff reported: "At the beginning of the year, we had a lot of people join, and now it's down to the staff we had last summer. So almost everybody quit, and we have to do all the pages that they didn't do. We gotta really work to get our stuff done." The failure of others to do their part interfered with the achievement of goals that youth had for the activity, and sometimes left them doing much more work than they planned.

Fourth, some students described being subject to negative peer influences. Some of the experiences in this category resulted from our probe on this topic. For instance, one boy said, "If they're your teammates, that would probably have a bad influence. I mean, everybody wants to party every now and then. So you give in and you do what they do. That's probably bad." This boy did not identify the type of behavior he was being pressured to adopt, but his statement suggests peer processes similar to those lying behind the finding that participation in sports was related to increases in alcohol use (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Moore & Werch, 2005).

A final category of negative experiences attributable to peers, dealt not with peers in the activity but with those outside of it. A number of youth reported being ridiculed for belonging to the activity or for the performance of the team or group. A boy in FFA reported being taunted that their initials stood for "Future Fags of America." A girl reported that their dance group had performed a really hard routine during halftime of a basketball game, but "everyone in the crowd is like, 'You guys suck'." These comments from non-members often stung. Someone on a losing sports team said, "Sometimes the reputation that we have kind of pulls our self-esteem down."

The high rates of negative experiences with peers can be understood in terms of the developmental features of adolescence. Friends and peers are often the most important people in adolescents' lives, so teens are very sensitive to how peers act and what they think (Brown, 2004). Participating in activities has the potential to provide youth with many social benefits (Patrick et al., 1999). Yet managing interpersonal relationships with other teenagers, including those whom you are thrown together with in an organized activity, is challenging. Of course, difficulties in relating to and working with others occurs across the life span, but Larson, Hansen, and Walker (2005) have argued that the cognitive egocentrism of this developmental period may increase the difficulties for teenagers. Their nascent ability to see others' points of view and coordinate actions with others may heighten the possibility for peer misunderstanding and conflict.

### **Adult Leaders**

The students also reported that many negative experiences were attributable to their adult leaders. First, youth described frequent experiences of being upset when leaders favored certain youth over others. These were situations where they perceived that some youth received special treatment, while others were picked on. A youth reported, "I was hurt one time, and when I was hurt, it didn't matter [to the coach]. But there was another player that was hurt and, 'Oh, you need to sit out, and you need to make sure your arm's okay'." A girl reported a similar reaction in a different situation: "That makes me so mad, because when a coach picks favorites, it doesn't help anybody else but that person. It makes you feel like they only care about that one person. And sometimes they're just so busy about that one person



that that one person has all that stress and that one person can't even do it all anyway and it's going to end up hurting that person." This sense of injustice was also reported when a leader or coach selected out students for criticism. One boy said, "My band director can be difficult sometimes and sometimes it really seems like he picks on some of my friends for no reason or for stupid reasons." The frequency of these reports suggests that adolescents are very sensitive to unequal treatment from adults.

A second common category of negative adult experiences was leaders who were disrespectful or demeaning. One youth said, "This coach of mine can make you feel like you were born wrong." Another said, "Our coaches are always negative; they put us down." In several cases, youth saw this type of cutting comment as an attempt to motivate them, but this was rare. In one case, this demeaning attitude was experienced as discrimination, "They think that you don't know nothing. It also has to do with your race and your gender." Research suggests that support from adults is a critical feature of fostering development in youth programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002); disrespectful and demeaning comments from leaders are likely to undermine young people's experience of support.

Third, youth described leaders placing unreasonable demands on them. Some students attributed this to the fact that leaders sometimes "think that your life is centered around what you do with them." A girl complained that the adult leader wanted them "to choose between practice and our religion." In another situation, a youth reported: "The advisor he takes on more than what we can handle, and it ends up that everybody gets burned out and doesn't want to do it, but yet he brings it on and decides that we need to do it. It kind of gets discouraging." An underlying problem was when leaders' expectations for the activity did not match those of the youth. One girl said, "With coaches if winning is everything to them, and it's not to you, that can really make a season very unenjoyable." Another complained that they "expect you to be something better than you can do it. And you know that you're working hard, but they don't believe you." In an observational study, Zeldin and Camino (1999) found that youth practitioners sometimes expect youth to do things that *even they could not do*, a situation that sets youth up for failure.

A fourth type of negative experience was related to adults who were unknowledgeable or poor leaders. This included leaders who were inexperienced either with the activity or in serving as a leader for that activity. For instance, one girl said, "On our JV volleyball team, we had a new coach this year and that was her first year. I mean we had to teach her basically everything." Another girl said, "Last year during basketball season, we had a coach who wasn't all there, and he didn't really know how to talk to the girls, and one of the girls just ended up going off on him, and crying, and leaving during practice and everything. And that just pulled everything apart for a little while. Everyone was just really nervous about what had happened." In one instance, a youth reported that the girls in the program became so angry and confrontational with their coach for his ignorance and repeated absences from practice that he responded by placing a note on his door that said, "Since you guys don't want me to be the coach, then I won't coach today. You guys can coach yourselves." Many of the adults leading youth programs are volunteers with little or no training (Carnegie, 1992), and this may increase the frequency with which youth encounter incompetent and immature adult behavior. This can be particularly discouraging as youth activities provide a critical opportunity for young people to gain new skills.

Fifth, several students reported negative experiences when leaders tried to be more of a friend than a leader. These students felt the adults were unsuccessful at maintaining their role as



leader when they were also trying to be a friend. For example, one girl said, "I get fed up with that when they try to be my sister or my mother. That's not what I'm here for. I'm here to sing." Although many youth appreciate leaders who are empathic and provide emotional support (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994), in some cases youth find a leader's attempts to relate to them on a personal level to be intrusive and disruptive to their participation in the activity.

Lastly, students described instances of inappropriate and unethical adult behavior. One girl in track complained that, while her coach followed the rules, coaches on other teams cheated, "Like when they're doing times, they'll say their person's time was faster even though it was really slow." In several cases, coaches were reported to encourage physical violence. One boy said, "It got to a point where he [football coach] doesn't tell us, go out there and win a game. It's go out there and hurt somebody." This is consistent with the findings of Eder and Parker (1987) that being physically aggressive was praised in football and that some coaches taught youth that winning required being overly aggressive, even to the point of injuring another player.

The students' large volume and variety of negative experiences with adult leaders reflects the central role that leaders play in organizing and setting the climate in most youth activities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). When combined with the finding of Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) that youth report high rates of inappropriate adult behavior in sports activities, it becomes evident that many adult leaders are not meeting the developmental needs of youth. The wide array of negative experiences reported by our students reflects different ways in which adult leaders failed to provide, or undermined, different features of a positive and facilitative environment.

### **Oneself and Other Parts of One's Life**

Another category of negative experiences included those portrayed as originating from the adolescents themselves. This included negative experiences related to the students' self-evaluations and to conflicts between the organized activity and other domains of their lives.

A first type of negative experience in this category was performance anxiety, most often reported in sports and occasionally in music. As expressed by one boy, "The night before a big game, you start getting worried. If I mess up here, I might cost the whole team." Research on youth sports shows that performance anxiety can impair performance and lead youth to drop out of an activity (Scanlan et al., 2005; Smoll & Smith, 1996).

An associated type of negative experience was the distress students reported after they did not perform as well as they expected. This distress was related both to individual and group performance. For instance, a girl said, "If things don't go the way you expect them, it gets a whole lot more frustrating and it's a lot harder." A boy said, "Our football season wasn't so good. I mean, we just kept losing and losing. It's never fun when you lose. You just want to give up and quit." When individuals did not perform well, they also described feeling that they had let others down. For example a girl said: "I get down on myself a lot when I'm not doing what I want to, and so the other teammates see it and they can't bring me up if I get so mad. It directs the whole level of the whole team if one player can't get back up." As with performance anxiety, research on youth sports has documented that failure to achieve goals within the activity is a significant source of distress (Brustad, Babkes, & Smith, 2001; Scanlan et al., 2005).

Another type of negative experience related to self was encountering one's own negative behavior or traits. A number of these responses resulted from our probe on this topic. One student described how losing his position as captain forced him to recognize his own negative behavior: "The most disappointing thing that I figured out is that I didn't have enough ambition and I didn't have enough drive and determination to do what I wanted to do, until I figured out that it was hurting the whole team...and then I got my captain's spot taken away from me. And that hurt, that made me realize that I let the team down and it hurt really bad." Another boy described learning he did not like how he interacted with his teammates. "I discovered that I had a problem with a couple players on the team, and instead of just talking it out with them, I just.... go off into the corner and be to myself...so I didn't really like that about myself." Youth activities are a context in which teenagers explore their identities, and it is inevitable that sometimes youth discover selves that they do not like.

A final area of negative experience in this category was stress related to competition between organized activities and the demands from other parts of their lives. As one youth said, "Stress happens to me when I am trying to balance homework, housework, and a job." Another described how this stress could accumulate: "Like sometimes, if you're in a lot of activities, your day might be too long, and so you get to bed really late and then you have to get up early for school and you don't get enough sleep. And then, falling asleep in class, your grades suffer and basically it's a chain reaction." The stress experienced by contemporary "hurried youth" has been described in the popular writings (Brooks, 2001; Meeks & Mauldin, 1990). Although time budget research suggests that the majority of American teens are not over-programmed (Larson & Seepersad, 2003), it is important to understand the experiences of those who are in this situation.

Adolescence is a period when a young person's sense of self is in flux, which may make youth more vulnerable to negative identity experiences. Youth programs engage youth in actions and expose them to norms and values that may bear in both positive and negative ways on their sense of who they are (Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

## Parents

A smaller reported source of negative experiences was students' parents. Most often this took the form of feeling pressure from parents. This pressure included pressure to join an activity, pressure to quit an activity, pressure to stay in an activity, and pressure to perform better in an activity. For instance, one student said, "Sometimes, parents pressure you to either stay in or get out, like if they really want you to do something and you really don't want to do it. Maybe you'll do it anyway to make your parents proud of you. [But] if my parents are always going to be on my case about it, then it's not worth it." Several students described their parents yelling at them. One boy said, "If I ever quit something, my dad would probably scream my head off." Students also described being forced to quit an activity when a parent felt they were over committed and their schoolwork or job was suffering. Other research has documented similar findings of stress related to parental pressure within sports (Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Scanlan et al., 2005); less is known about whether similar pressure is a problem in other activities. Participation in youth activities has been found to facilitate a positive parent-child relationship and parental monitoring (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). When a young person's relationship with his or her parent around activities is not positive, these positive influences on the parent-child relationship are less likely to occur.

## Community Members

The final source of negative experiences described by the students was community members. These youth encountered inappropriate or unappreciated community member behavior. A few students described negative fan behavior at sporting events. "The teammates' dads, they don't think their kids can do anything wrong. In one instance, she was just not sharp that game and her dad was yelling at everybody else trying to make it sound like it was their fault." This unappreciated behavior may have come from the parents' of their peers or from other members of the community. One student described having a negative interaction with community members when trying to sell tickets to the school play: "We were trying to sell tickets this week. And a lot of times we'd go and ask if anybody wanted to buy a ticket, and they're like, 'No, we don't want to buy tickets to the play, why would we want to come see the play?' I mean, we put a lot of hard work into it." In some cases this negative adult behavior came from adults who had a peripheral relationship to the activity. A youth complained that some of the adults at a youth leadership conference had "a whole bunch of stereotypes about teenagers and what we do and how we act." Another youth reported that the sponsor of a theater group was prone to temper tantrums, "If she doesn't like something, she throws chairs and stuff and does other interesting things."

Although infrequent, these negative experiences with adults in the community are an important cautionary warning. Currently there is much emphasis in the field of youth development on encouraging greater engagement of youth in communities, often via youth programs (Hughes & Curan, 2000; Zeldin, Camino, & Wheeler, 2000). And interacting with community members can contribute to youths' emerging self-definition (Eccles & Barber, 1999). But, although it is possible to screen and to train the adult leaders of youth programs, it is not feasible to do the same for all the adults whom youth may come into contact with via community outreach.

## Responses to Negative Experiences

The students described two types of responses to their negative experiences in organized youth activities. One was a passive response of feeling negative emotions, which in some cases exacerbated and prolonged the negative experience. The other entailed some form of active coping.

### Negative Emotions

Students frequently described negative emotions as a central part of their response to negative experiences. The emotions they described included anxiety, anger, sadness, and being stressed or upset. One girl said, "When you don't do as well as you'd like to, you get really upset. I get really mad." Another youth reported that after experiencing stress, "your nerves are shot completely." Yet another observed that "some girls can't take criticism and it just tears them apart."

These negative emotions became particularly problematic when they were prolonged. One girl described her inability to deal with feelings of anger, "When you don't do very good, I get mad, and I just keep getting worse." Another girl described her mounting feelings of stress in dance: "Every week we had to learn a new dance, and you have to have that four minute dance learned by the end of the week. If you don't have it, then what are you supposed to do? And it's hard having to learn that on your spare time and then having to have other time for everything else and schoolwork. It was really really hard and very stressful." Although some of the negative emotions passed quickly, in other instances such as these, they persisted.

In some cases, the negative emotions affected youth in ways that led to their perpetuation. The students talked about not being able to prevent their emotions from interfering with their attention and performance. For example, one girl said, "It kind of carries over to your schoolwork. Like if you're having a bad time in your extracurricular activity, if you're not getting with that, then your attitude's like, 'well I'm not going to get this either'." The students also reported that negative emotions led them to act in ways that interfered with their relationships with peers. One youth reported, "I'll be pissed off and yell at people." Another observed that she would develop this "really hatey attitude.... I have this face like I want to kill somebody." The students also reported that negative emotions can damage relationships with adult leaders. One girl said, "A coach of another team, she kind of made me upset one time and I accidentally told her to shut-up. I didn't mean to, but she made a very bad comment about somebody on our team. And it almost got us disqualified from the track meet." Through these various scenarios, negative emotions can create self-perpetuating cycles.

Certainly many negative emotions come and go quickly, but that is not always the case, especially when the situation eliciting them is a continuing one. Students' reports indicate that negative emotions can disrupt and interfere with their psychological engagement and their participation in meaningful relationships in the activity, as well as leading youth to drop out.

### **Coping and Personal Growth**

The second type of response to negative experiences was an active coping response. This included, first, using emotion-focused coping. One girl described how "I get really mad and I can't calm down," but if she separates herself from people, she can get over it: "I just have to sit alone for an hour and it goes away." For some youth this stratagem took the form of restructuring how they interpreted a situation so that their emotional involvement was reduced. For example, a boy explained: "A couple weeks ago, our baseball coach was quoted in the paper as saying we weren't very good, and a lot of people on our team took that the wrong way. But, I kind of took it as he's just kind of telling them the truth because we only won three games. And we just lost like 17 to nothing. And a lot of people on the team took it like he was trying to say that we all sucked and we were worthless. But I took it as you know he was just telling people how it is. But we have to get better - that's what our goal was this year - to get better." Although many team members had been upset by the coach's statement, this youth was able to use the statement as a stimulus to work harder.

In some cases, successful emotion-focused coping led to learning. Students reported that experiences in youth activities had helped them learn to control anger and anxiety. They also recounted acquiring strategies for managing stress and learning to prevent emotions from interfering with attention and performance (Dworkin et al., 2003). Several students also reported that they had learned from youth activities that they could get along with an adult leader, even if they disliked him or her.

Next, students reported the use of problem-focused coping. For example, in response to competing time pressures from school, work, and jobs, a number of youth reported developing strategies to better organize their week. One girl said, "It has taught me to organize my time better. I have had to put my social life on hold sometimes." In some cases problem-focused coping took the form of standing up to adult leaders, as in this example: "One of our coaches, she would always make us have to choose between practice and our religion, you know. It was really hard and I had to walk out of practice a few times before she got the point that I believe in God really strongly, and she's not going to make me go to heaven. So if it took me having to

miss practice for her to understand that, then I was sorry. But finally she came around and she started understanding that sports was not my life, it was something I liked to do.” This girl responded to the negative behavior of her leader with a deliberate, long-term, and ultimately successful campaign of action.

A central point conveyed by these examples is that negative experiences sometimes led to positive development for these students. By confronting an emotion or solving the problem that created the negative experience, youth sometimes learned a great deal. The experience provided the material for developmental change and learning. Sometimes this is a long haul requiring much determination, as in the example of one girl’s negative experience with her dance team.

“I thought that I was a very good dancer before I was in Eaglettes and they would always have to stop and teach me things over and over again. I was getting so frustrated. And I ended up getting the ‘Most Improved Dancer Award’, but it was hard. And they would always tell me, ‘you’re not doing this right. Put your leg straight. Do this. Do that.’ I’m like, oh my gosh, I’m quitting. I was getting so upset, but I finally got it. And then I could give other people the criticism that they were giving me. And you feel more sure of yourself, and it feels good.”

Research shows that in many circumstances, such as these, adversity stimulates basic human adaptation processes, which in some cases leads to positive development (Masten, 2001). What we cannot determine from our data is: what individual and situational conditions make the difference between a negative experience just becoming more negative, versus becoming an opportunity for constructive learning and growth? Given this lack of knowledge, it would be irresponsible to dismiss young people’s negative experiences in youth programs. But it does suggest that, when these experiences occur, adult leaders, parents, and community members should look for ways to help youth use them as opportunities for growth and learning.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this research provide a beginning cataloging of the variety of negative experiences that adolescents encounter in organized activities, as well as how they respond to them. Negative experiences are important to understand because they disrupt youth’s process of engagement in the developmental systems provided by youth programs. They can interfere with attention to activities, reduce engagement in the relationships through which development occurs, lead to burn out or drop out, and – in some cases – can provide the seeds of learning and growth.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

In interpreting these findings, it is essential to keep in mind the limits and strengths of the methodology used. Focus groups create a tumbling exchange of rich reports from participants, but these reports are limited to what youth are willing and able to report. The group context did not seem to impede students from talking about negative peer experiences, but it might have limited descriptions of topics that young people find personal and private (e.g., sexual harassment), thus we cannot claim to have provided a full accounting of the range of negative experiences that youth encounter. It is also possible that some of the reported negative experiences have minimal long-term significance. Most importantly, the method was limited in that it did not allow us to identify the specific situations or programs in which these negative

experiences occurred – we suspect that they are much less likely in some programs than others. The strength of the methodology lies in obtaining youths' own accounts of their negative experiences, in their own words. By obtaining what is salient to them we are most likely to have captured material important to their decisions to remain in an activity and to developmental processes for which they are the agent.

Keeping these limitations and strengths in mind, three highlights stand out from the students' accounts.

- First, almost all of the negative experiences involved other people. They involved disruptions in youth's participation in relationship systems. Among these, peers and adult leaders were clearly the most frequently identified sources of negative experiences. This is not surprising given that peers and leaders are the main people youth have contact with in an organized activity. Nonetheless, the frequency of negative experiences with peers – with aversive behavior, cliquishness, and negative group dynamics – suggest the need for close attention to these peer dynamics as a crucial part of young people's experience. Both researchers and adult leaders need to draw on existing literature on adolescent peer relationships (e.g., Brown, 2004) and ask how it applies within organized settings. Likewise, the frequency of reported negative experiences with adult leaders – with their playing favorites, disrespecting youth, and upsetting young people in other ways – alerts us to the sensitivity of adolescents to adults' behaviors. Relationships between youth and adults are challenging and often contain ambiguities, for example, regarding ownership, authority, equality, and whether the adult is more like a parent, teacher, or friend (Camino, 2000; Krueger, 2000; Larson et al., 2005). Researchers have an important role to play in helping adult leaders better understand the dynamics of these relationships.
- Second, we observed that a disproportionate number of the youths' examples of negative experiences came from sports. This is partly attributed to the fact that more youth are involved in sports than in any other organized activity (Carnegie, 1992; U.S. Department of Education, 1995). But in a recent survey study of one Midwestern community, we found that, in comparison to other youth activities, adolescents reported higher rates of negative peer interactions and inappropriate adult behavior within a given sports activity (Hansen et al., 2003). These higher rates, research suggests, are attributable to the competitive nature of sports, which can elicit inappropriate behavior in youth, their parents, and coaches (Brustad et al., 2001; Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997). It is important to note that the students we studied also reported high rates for certain types of positive learning experiences in sports (Dworkin et al., 2003; Hansen et al., 2003). So sports appear to be related to a pattern of high negatives and high positives. Research needs to be directed at understanding how to minimize the former while maximizing the latter. This leads us to the third highlight of our findings, one that makes this balancing of negatives against positives more complex.
- Third, the students reported that some experiences that they initially appraised as negative sometimes led to positive outcomes. In many cases, the youths' aversive experiences were just negative, or even led to chains of further negatives, as when anger interfered with performance or caused youth to lash out at peers. But in some instances, the students reported coping effectively with aversive experiences. They reinterpreted the situation in ways that were less aversive, for example, by recognizing that a coach's demeaning statements were intended to motivate them; or they learned



something from the negative experience that made them better able to avoid or deal with that type of experience in the future. This pattern leaves us with the complex question of when and for whom adversity leads to growth and when and for whom it has negative consequences.

These findings must be seen as a very preliminary step in categorizing and understanding negative experiences in organized youth activities. Survey research is needed to better document the rates of negative experiences across populations of youth as a function of the type of activity, characteristics of adolescents, and the strategies and styles of adult leaders. This study obtained limited contextual information for interpreting many of the reported experiences; further qualitative research is needed to understand the situations that lead to their occurrence – from the viewpoints of other youth, adult leaders, and participant observers. Ultimately, longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate long-term sequella: to better understand when different constellations of negative and positive experiences are related to dropping out, adverse consequences, and positive development. We do not yet have sufficient information to conclusively say which experiences are likely to be most adverse and how they will affect youth.

### **Implications for Practice**

While as researchers, our professional inclination is to say that more research is needed before applying these findings to practice, clearly the findings suggest issues that adult leaders need to be attuned to, ranging from paying attention to how their own actions are interpreted by participants to helping youth restructure adverse experiences. For example, in programs where young people are brought into direct contact with community members, the findings suggest that leaders should work to prevent or prepare young people for negative behavior by these adults. Research on youth sports shows that even short term training programs for coaches can significantly improve the experiences of athletes (Smith & Smoll, 1997; Smoll & Smith, 2001). We need to draw upon the expertise of seasoned youth leaders and the emerging body of research knowledge to ensure that adult leaders learn the skills needed to optimize the developmental experiences of youth in their programs.

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