

# BREADTH AND INTENSITY OF YOUTH ACTIVITY INVOLVEMENT AS CONTEXTS FOR POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT

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## Introduction

- Youth activities can serve as important developmental contexts. Studies have shown that adolescent involvement in structured, organized extra-curricular or community-based activities is associated with intrapersonal well-being, identity development, academic success, social bonds, and reduced risk behavior involvement.
- Approaches to assessing involvement, however, have been inconsistent across studies. Common strategies have included dichotomous measurement (involved vs. not), activity counts, or frequency of involvement. Each of these strategies may obscure important information.
- Some theorists (e.g., Cote, 1999; Marcia, 1966; Baltes et al., 1999; Lerner et al., 2001) have distinguished between diversity and intensity of involvement in promoting identity development, expertise, and "successful development" more generally. Limited empirical attention, however, has been given to distinguishing between these facets.
- The present study, we examined breadth and intensity of youth activity involvement in relation to several key developmental domains: risk behavior involvement, psychological functioning, academic orientation, and interpersonal functioning.

## Participants and Procedures

- In 2001, students from 25 high schools from a school board in Southern Ontario completed a confidential 2-hour survey during school time.
- The 23-page survey encompassed questions related to a host of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental domains, as well as youth activity involvement.
- The analysis sample consisted of 7430 youth: 50% male, median age was 16 years, 91% were born in Canada and were primarily Caucasian.

## Measuring Youth Activity Involvement

Past month frequency of involvement (0=never, to 4=several times a week) was assessed for eight activities: sports in school, sports outside of school, clubs in school, clubs outside of school, musical instruments, theatre arts, volunteering, leadership.

**Breadth** = number of activities (0 to 8) in which youth were involved.

**Intensity** = average frequency of involvement (0 to 4) for those activities in which youth reported at least some level of involvement.

## Other Developmental Domains

**Demographics:** age, sex, parental education

**Risk behavior:** composite of frequency of involvement with substance use (alcohol, smoking, marijuana, hard drugs), sexual activity, delinquency, and aggression.

**Psychological functioning:** composite of depression, social anxiety, daily hassles, self-esteem, and optimism.

**Academic orientation:** composite of school grades, educational aspirations, importance of education, boredom in class, skipping classes, planfulness, and student-teacher relationships.

**Interpersonal functioning:** composite of maternal attachment, paternal attachment, friendship attachment, best-friendship quality, peer victimization, and support network size.

\* Composite indices were standardized prior to analysis (i.e., all  $M_s = 0$ ,  $SD_s = 1$ ).

## Analysis and Results

- On average, youth were involved in two or three activities ( $M$  breadth = 2.76,  $SD = 2.02$ ). For the activities in which youth participated, the most typical frequency of involvement was "once a week" ( $M$  intensity = 1.82,  $SD = 1.01$ ).
- Table 1 below displays the prevalence of youth involvement and the mean frequency of involvement for each of the eight activities. Overall, involvement was greatest for sports in school and sports outside of school. Involvement was lowest for theatre arts and leadership activities.

Table 1. Prevalence and average frequency of involvement by activity

Activity	Prevalence (% of sample)	M	SD
Sports in school	44%	1.08	1.42
Sports outside of school	42%	1.11	1.38
Clubs in school	32%	0.72	1.16
Clubs outside of school	38%	0.76	1.10
Theatre arts	21%	0.35	0.81
Musical instruments	33%	0.89	1.41
Volunteering	41%	0.65	0.92
Leadership	24%	0.40	0.83

Note.  $N = 7430$ .

- Breadth and intensity were positively correlated ( $r = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Involvement in a greater number of activities was associated with more frequent involvement. These two dimensions, however, were independent of each other ( $r^2 = .22$ ).
- Both breadth and intensity were positively correlated with each of the four developmental indices. Greater breadth and more intense involvement were associated with less risk behavior involvement, more positive well-being, stronger academic orientation, and more positive interpersonal functioning (median  $r = .14$ , all  $ps < .001$ ).
- To explore the unique relations between breadth and intensity and each developmental domain, each of the four developmental indices were regressed onto:
  - demographic variables (step 1)
  - breadth and intensity of involvement (step 2)
  - three non-linear effects: breadth<sup>2</sup>, intensity<sup>2</sup>, breadth x intensity (step 3)
- Results are presented in Table 2 (next column).

**Risk behavior involvement:** Breadth was a unique predictor. Further, there was a curvilinear effect such that the relation between breadth and less risk behavior was stronger at lower (rather than higher) levels of breadth.

**Psychological functioning:** Breadth and intensity were both unique predictors of more positive well-being. Further, there was an interaction such that the most positive levels of well-being were found among those reporting high breadth and high intensity of involvement.

**Academic orientation:** Breadth and intensity were both unique predictors. Further, there was a curvilinear effect such that the relation between breadth and academic orientation was stronger at lower (rather than higher) levels of breadth.

**Interpersonal functioning:** Breadth was a unique predictor.

Table 2. Results from multiple regression analyses

Predictor	Criterion			
	Risk behavior involvement	Psychological functioning	Academic orientation	Interpersonal functioning
Age	.16*	.07*	.01	.07*
Gender	-.18*	-.11*	.19*	.32*
Parental education	-.12*	.12*	.24*	.08*
Breadth	-.11*	.10*	.21*	.12*
Intensity	.00	.09*	.07*	.04
Breadth <sup>2</sup>	.06*	-.03	-.07*	-.04
Intensity <sup>2</sup>	.01	-.04	-.02	-.02
Breadth x intensity	.02	.07*	.04	.01
Model R <sup>2</sup>	9.3%	6.2%	16.7%	13.3%

Note.  $N = 7430$ . Unstandardized regression coefficients are shown from step 3. \*  $p < .001$ .

- To examine the consistency of these results, we examined participant age, sex, and socioeconomic level as potential moderator variables in the regression models.
- In no cases were significant interactions found between breadth and intensity and any of the demographic variables. In the present sample, therefore, results based on the full sample were consistent across age, sex, and socioeconomic level.

## Summary and Discussion

- Although breadth and intensity were positively intercorrelated, they were found to be separable facets of youth activity involvement.
- Consistent with previous research, activity involvement was positively associated with several developmental features, including reduced risk behavior involvement, more positive psychological functioning, stronger academic orientation, and more positive interpersonal functioning.
- Of the two involvement dimensions, breadth had more consistent and stronger unique relations with each developmental index than did intensity of involvement.
- Breadth may provide opportunities for the development of diverse skills, exposure to a variety of unique experiences, and expanded social supports. Success in one domain may advance the generalization of positive features. Further, what is lacking in one context may be compensated by positive experiences in another context.
- The benefits of diversity, however, may have its limits. Non-linear effects suggest that beyond a certain level of diversity of involvement, participation in more activities may not carry additional "benefits".
- Researchers need to consider the implications of their measurement strategies when examining how youth activity involvement relates to developmental outcomes. We recommend that **both** breadth and intensity be explored as unique dimensions of youth activity involvement.