

Participation in Youth Programs as a Catalyst for Negotiation of Family Autonomy with Connection

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Abstract Current research and theory suggest that the healthy path of autonomy development involves gradual negotiation of adolescents' independence *within* a con-

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text of continued family connection. This theory-generating study examined the role that adolescents' participation in youth programs plays in these adolescent-parent negotiations. Qualitative data from high-school-aged youth in 12 programs and from a sub-sample of parents were analyzed employing methods of grounded theory. These analyses suggest that program participation provides a pathway of opportunities for youth to exercise individual choice and develop qualities of self-reliance with parental approval. In turn, parents' observation of self-reliance in the program and youth's demonstration of these qualities in family interactions can lead to changes in adolescent-parent relationships that provide youth greater family autonomy with connection.

Keywords Autonomy · Youth Development Program · Parent-Youth Relationship · Positive Development

The process through which adolescents attain greater independence vis a vis their families involves a high stakes transaction between parties with somewhat divergent priorities. Most adolescents want their parents to trust them with increasing control over their daily activities and decision making. Most parents share this long-term goal, but are often concerned whether their child is yet sufficiently responsible and self-governing to manage greater freedom and steer clear of the dangers and temptations of peer and

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street life (Smetana, 2002). Early theorists saw these divergent priorities as a formula for conflict and possible rupture of child-parent relationships, but believed conflict was necessary for adolescents' development of healthy independence (Blos, 1967; Freud, 1946).

In the 1960s and 70s, however, adolescent scholars began to develop a dramatically different view of the process of autonomy development. Daniel Offer's path-breaking study of teenage boys showed that, in most families, relationships between these youth and their parents involved open communication and mutual respect (Offer, 1969). They spoke the same language; their viewpoints were not so far apart. Most importantly, he began to show that, although some conflict occurred, particularly in early adolescence, "psychological maturation . . . did not require vigorous disassociation from parents" (Offer and Offer, 1975, p. 168; see also Offer et al., 2004).

Building on Offer's and others' similar findings with both sexes, scholars in the 1980s came to a consensus that adolescents' development of autonomy is *not* at odds with maintaining close and amicable relationships with parents. Research showed that the most healthy path of autonomy development involved adolescents' gradual "negotiation" of independence *within* a context of continued family connection (Grotevant and Cooper, 1986; Hauser, 1991; Hill and Holmbeck, 1986). This positive path is theorized to involve reciprocal transactions in which teens progressively demonstrates greater capacity for self-reliance and parents, in turn, grant them greater freedom and responsibility (Collins, 1995; Smetana, 2002; Steinberg, 2001).

Knowledge is limited, however, on how these negotiations unfold over time in relation to specific issues in adolescents' lives. As is true of developmental science more broadly (Valsinger, 2006), there is remarkably little research on the actual developmental processes, as they occur in context. To help facilitate positive development in youth's relationships with their families, it is important for us to understand what arenas provide favorable opportunities for these adolescent-parent transactions and how these transactions progress.

This theory-generating study examines the role that adolescents' participation in youth development programs plays as a venue for these negotiations. Youth programs (including extra-curricular activities and community-based programs) provide teens unique opportunities for independent action and achievement, and research suggests that participation is related to their development of capabilities associated with self-reliance, such as initiative, responsibility, and self-control (Mahoney et al., 2005; Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins, 2003). Indeed parents often encourage their children's participation in programs with the expectation that it will increase their competencies, including their self-reliance (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Hutchinson et al., 2003; Jarrett, 1995). An important question is how experi-

ences in youth programs might feed back on adolescents' relationships with their parents. Does their development of self-reliance in this context create family tensions, or serve as a positive catalyst for adolescent-parent autonomy negotiations?

It would be naïve, of course, to assume that program participation is related to a single pathway in how these negotiations unfold, and our objectives included identifying variations in this process. The literature on youth programs suggests that parents differ in their attitudes and behavior in relation to their children's program participation, which may lead to differing scenarios including ones that entail adolescent-parent tension or conflict. Young people's involvement in programs is typically a focus of positive and supportive parent-child interactions, but some parents are disengaged, while others are overinvolved in ways that can interfere with youth's experiences (Côté and Hay, 2002; Hutchinson et al., 2003). The scenario of parental overinvolvement has been described for youth sports: a minority of parents are found to coerce children's participation or act intrusively in ways that undermine youth's independence within the sport (Scanlan et al., 2005; Smoll and Cumming, 2006). Smoll and Cumming (2006) speculate that these behaviors may be motivated by parents' "reverse dependency" on their children, a pattern that early family psychologists discussed as an obstacle to youth's achievement of autonomy (Minuchin, 1974; Stierlin et al., 1974).

The unfolding of adolescent-parent autonomy negotiations may also be influenced by the ecological contexts in which families live. Most research on autonomy development has focused on middle class families living in comparatively safe neighborhoods. However, families in high risk, low-resource urban neighborhoods face particularly high stakes and difficult challenges in these negotiations. Youth in these settings are subject to heightened risk of involvement in drugs, gangs, and premature parenting (Furstenberg, 1993; Jarrett, 1995, 2003; Williams and Kornblum, 1985), and parents recognize that permitting youth independence can have critical, if not life threatening consequences (Barclay-McLaughlin, 2000; Jarrett, 2003). Some parents respond to these risks by confining youth and imposing strict controls, including restricting participation in outside activities (Jarrett, 1999). But this level of control may limit young people's opportunities for autonomy development, or lead to adolescents' frustration and rebellion against parental restrictions (Aschenbrenner, 1975; Barclay-McLaughlin, 2000; Clark, 1983).

In other urban families, parents identify institutions, including youth programs, that are safe and that they believe will help foster their children's development (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Jarrett, 1999, 2003). Jarrett (1995) describes this parenting strategy of placing youth in safe, mobility-enhancing institutions as "sponsored development." The

objectives reported by these parents—like those reported by many middle class parents (Hutchinson et al., 2003; Lareau, 2003)—include the expectation that program participation will facilitate their children’s development of independent judgment and self-reliance. Research is needed, however, to understand whether and how youth programs serve this function—across ecological contexts—including how youth’s experience of self-reliance in the program might feed back on the negotiation of autonomy in adolescent-parent relationships.

Our objective for the analyses in this article was to begin to describe the different processes and pathways of these transactions. As youth join and become involved in youth programs, how does their participation serve as an arena for autonomy development? What role might adolescent-parent conflict play? And how do these transactions unfold over time?

Given the absence of prior research on these process questions, we felt they called for open-ended discovery research. Therefore, we used the systematic methods of grounded theory and related techniques, which were designed to formulate preliminary conceptualization of processes in context, based on the experiences of participants in these processes (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Although our goal was to ground this theory development in the experiences reported by adolescents and parents, our analyses were also informed by the literature on autonomy development. A key distinction we employed from this literature is that it involves two processes at interrelated but distinct levels of analysis (Hill and Holmbeck, 1986; Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins, 2003). The first is the individual adolescent’s development of capacities for self-reliance and personal autonomy, which includes acquiring behavioral, cognitive and emotional competencies for self governance. Second is a process of change in the adolescent-parent relationship that we will call “family autonomy,” which includes changes in youth’s standing in the relationship and the independence they are granted, or achieve, from parental controls.

A study of developmental processes in 12 youth programs

Data collection

To understand these pathways we drew on data from a qualitative study of developmental processes in youth programs (The Youth Development Experience: TYDE). This study followed high-school-aged youth in 12 arts, technology, and leadership/service programs over a 2–9 month natural period

of participation (Table 1).¹ Because the study’s objective was to observe the occurrence of developmental processes, we selected programs identified by the local youth development community to be high quality (Larson et al., 2005a,b). Seven programs were in urban Chicago and five were in down-state Illinois communities and small cities (henceforth referred to as “rural”). Four were located in schools, six in community-based organizations, and two in faith-based organizations.

All of these programs made efforts to connect with youth’s families. The program advisors communicated with parents by sending informational materials home and they called parents, as needed, for example, when a youth indicated that a parent had a concern. All programs held one or several events to which parents and family members were invited, such as a performance, exhibit, parent meeting, or awards banquet. None of the programs had the kind of competitive ethos that has been linked to parents’ intrusive behavior in some sports programs.

The research followed ongoing events and experiences in the programs from three primary points of view: that of the youth, the program advisors, and an observer from our research staff. In each program the program advisors helped us select a sample of youth that was representative of program participants in gender, age, ethnicity, and length of participation in the program. These youth were interviewed at regular intervals over the study period. (In most programs interviews were biweekly, but they were scheduled more frequently in two summer programs, Art-First and Harambee, in which youth met daily, and less frequently in the 4-H program, in which program meetings were infrequent). Longer face-to-face interviews were conducted at the beginning, middle and end of the research period, and shorter phone interviews were conducted during intervening periods. A total of 113 youth were interviewed on 661 occasions. These youth included approximately equal numbers of African American ($N = 37$), European American ($N = 36$), and Latino ($N = 32$) youth. Some of these participants were new to the program, but many had been involved in it (or other programs sponsored by the same parent organization) prior to our study (for a median of 1.8 years; range 0 to 6 years). In addition, a total of 125 interviews were carried out with 26 adult advisors from the 12 programs, and 167 site observations were conducted.

Our interest in how the program impacted adolescent-parent relationships emerged part way through the study, at which point we decided to add interviews with parents. We received permission to contact parents of youth in 8 of the programs and were able to carry out a phone interview with 43 parents (36 mothers, 6 fathers, and one female guardian). In 33 cases these were parents of youth who had been

¹ The names of the programs, youth, and adults have been altered to preserve anonymity.

Table 1 Programs in the research

Program	Program description	Principle activities	Ethnicity of youth in the program	Number of youth in study	Number of parents interviewed	Study period
Clarkston FFA	High school-based FFA chapter in a rural town aimed at developing young people's "potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education."	Contests, service, planning a daycamp for 4th graders	White	11	7	4 months, spring 2002
Art First, Career Training program	Community-based non-profit with mission to provide high quality art education—free of charge—to Chicago's under-served youth	Career-development activities including training, an internship, painting community murals	Hispanic, African American, White, and Asian	12	–	4 months, summer 2002
Youth Action	Community-based youth activist program in Chicago where young people develop action campaigns to address problems that directly affect their lives	Planning a Youth Summit, campaigns to change school policies	Primarily Hispanic and African American	10	–	4 months, fall 2002
Les Miserables	A high school musical production in a rural town	Auditions, rehearsals and final performances	White	10	11	4 months, spring 2003
Youth Builders	Faith-based program that provides safe alternative activities to youth in a rural city during the summer	Performing arts, life skills training, supervising children, recreation activities	African American	5	3	2 months, summer 2003
Faith in Motion	Dance troupe in an evangelical church in a mid-sized city that created dance performances and supports youth's faith development	Dance and devotional activities	African American and White	9	4	4 months, fall 2003
Prairie County 4-H Federation	Community-based chapter of 4-H Federation; provides older club members with leadership opportunities and fosters friendships across the rural county	Planning meetings and activities for younger youth in 4-H	White	8	5	9 months, school year 2003–2004
Media Masters	School-based media arts training program where instructors from a community-based organization provide a 10-week after-school program in a Chicago high school	Learning and creating artwork with graphic software and video equipment	Hispanic	8	–	3 months, fall 2003
The Studio	Community-based career development program targeted at out of school youth; provides training in multimedia arts	Producing, engineering and designing graphics for a music CD	Primarily Hispanic and African American	10	–	3 months, spring 2004
Harambee	The summer employment component of a school-based school-community partnership in Chicago; targets community building and leadership	Research of city transit issues, creating a mural and a documentary video	Primarily African American	10	4	2 months, summer 2004
El Concilio	The youth council for a community-based organization in Chicago; involves youth in community leadership and service	Planning community events for youth and service activities	Primarily Hispanic	10	5	4 months, fall 2004
SisterHood	An all-female youth group focused on development of identity and leadership, based in a community-based youth agency in Chicago	Weekly discussions, trips and workshops	Primarily African American	10	4	9 months, school year 2004–05

interviewed; in 10 cases they were parents of youth in the program who had not been interviewed.²

The interviews with youth followed open-ended interview guides aimed at obtaining interviewees' accounts of developmental processes in the context of their ongoing experiences within the program. In each interview, youth were asked to describe their recent activities and experiences in the program, and information about family members in relationship to the programs were sometimes mentioned in these accounts. For the initial interviews with youth, interviewers asked about why they joined to program, how their parents felt about and supported their participation, their parents' involvement in the program, and what type of involvement they would like from the program. In the middle interview, interviewers asked youth about how the program affected family relationships and household routines. In the final interviews, youth were asked how the attitudes of parents or other family members toward the program had changed and why, and about changes in their relationships with the families as a result of the program. The same interviewer conducted all interviews with each youth, and interviewers were encouraged to adapt questions according to prior information obtained from the youth and to probe and follow up on interviewees' accounts of experiences to obtain a complete picture.

Likewise, the interviews with the sub-sample of parents was aimed at getting a comprehensive view of their experience of the program from their point of view. The interview guide covered the following domains: (a) why their son or daughter joined the program, their role in and support for that decision, (b) their perceptions of the youth's experience in the program, (c) how the youth's participation complements or competes with family activities, (d) their own involvement in the program and interactions with the adult leaders, and (e) what influence they thought the program had had on their son or daughter.

The interviews with leaders did not include specific questions about the youth's families, but leaders mentioned youth's families periodically in their accounts of program activities.

Data analyses

The qualitative analyses involved cycles of close reading and analysis of the data alternating with formulation of concepts about autonomy development in this context (Patton, 2002).

² It should be noted that, although our theoretical focus was on "negotiations" between adolescents and parents, for a majority of families we only had data from one member's accounts of these transactions (most often the youth's) and the parent data came from only one point in time, thus limiting our ability to fully capture ongoing give and take between parties.

The initial phase focused on autonomy processes. First, we identified all youth, parent, leader, and observational data in the transcripts that bore on family relationships (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). Second, we drew on our initial reading of these data and the autonomy literature to develop a group of preliminary analytic questions (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Each question dealt with a different type of process that we had seen or that the literature suggested we might see, for example: "How did parents support and encourage youth joining and participating in the program?" "In what ways did family members oppose or interfere with youth's participation?" Third, we went through the data and identified all passages that bore on each analytic question, i.e. on each process.

In the next phase the data for each of these processes were analyzed. This phase began with a close examination of the set of accounts found for each process. Some analytic questions yielded a large amount of data, which led to steps of open and focused coding of the data, aimed at describing and understanding that process and the various permutations it took (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Some questions yielded little or no data, and thus received no further attention (cf. Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). For example, we found only one instance in which parents used the program to compel the youth to be more autonomous, a process suggested by early clinical research describing "centrifugal" families (Stierlin et al., 1974).

This third phase involved analyses of how the different processes were related to each other—their conceptual ordering (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). By comparing and evaluating accounts for the different processes we concluded that the data could be meaningfully organized according to two higher order constructs: conflict and pathways. First, we found that the families could be divided into two groups, based on whether processes of conflict were reported around the youth's participation in the program. The majority of families fit into the "non-conflictual group." Their interactions regarding the program were positive, with no mention of tension, disagreement, or adolescent-parent divergence in goals or attitudes by the adolescent (nor by parents in cases where parents were interviewed). All data from this group of families was split out and then analyzed, including within process and between process analyses. These analyses suggested that the processes for this group could be conceptualized as following an approximate sequential order (cf. Strauss and Corbin, 1998), described as the "non-conflictual pathway" in the first major section below.

For the other families, those in the "conflictual group," some form of tension or conflict was mentioned. Analyses of the data for these families suggested several pathways that involved different forms of conflict, disagreement, or divergence in goals. We have called these "alternative

pathways,” and they are described in the second major section that follows. Membership in the conflictual vs. the non-conflictual groups did not clearly differ between urban and rural programs, nor by the sex of the adolescent.

In understanding the findings of these analyses, the nature of the sample and data should be kept in mind. We selected high quality programs. The sample includes only youth who were participating (not those who dropped out). The methods we chose were those of discovery research aimed at generating theory, not those for testing theory or determining rates of different pathways in the population.

The non-conflictual pathway

We first describe the pathway of experiences suggested for the majority of youth, those for whom no parent-adolescent conflict regarding the program was mentioned. Our analysis of data from this non-conflictual group led to identification of four steps or processes related to autonomy: (1) the decision to join the program, (2) adolescent-parent interactions as youth participated, (3) youth’s development of self-reliance (personal autonomy), and (4) youth achieving greater autonomy within adolescent-parent relationships (family autonomy). Although we present these four as a sequence, it should be recognized that the last three may have co-occurred and reciprocally influenced each other.

The decision to join the program

Youth and parents in the non-conflictual group provided similar explanations on how youth entered the program. Nearly all youth described joining the program as a choice they had made, and many did not mention family as part of their decision. The most frequent reasons they gave were personal ones: They were interested in the activity, they enjoyed it, or they saw it as a step in preparing them for a career (for example, in arts, technology, agriculture). A number said peers had encouraged them to join. All members of Youth Action and several members of El Concilio said they had chosen the program to fulfill their 40 hours high school service requirement.

Some youth did mention family as part of their reason for joining, and this was most common in three programs. In the rural FFA and 4H programs youth often said that other family members (siblings, parents, in one case a grandparent) had been involved in the program, which had influenced them, and several mentioned the family’s farming background as part of their reason. In SisterHood, an urban program for young women, a number said that their sisters had been in the program and had encouraged them to join.

Parents of youth in the non-conflictual group concurred in describing the decision as the youth’s to make. Although some said they had no role in the decision, nearly all reported having supported their child’s decision to join the program. In some cases they had provided encouragement. What is significant is that parents justified this support and encouragement in developmental terms. Consistent with past research, many parents perceived the program as an opportunity for the youth’s development of specific qualities, including self-reliance. They encouraged the youth’s participation as a chance for them to learn to set goals, develop confidence, and redirect their interests. A parent who had had two teens in the Prairie County 4H Federation said, “My kids both love animals and things like that. I just thought it would be a good opportunity to teach them responsibilities, you know, with their projects and things like that.”

A number of parents reported supporting the youth’s decision as a developmental end in itself. Asked what role, if any, she played in encouraging her daughter’s participation, an El Concilio parent said,

I have always told her to follow her heart. The same thing like my mother [said] with me: “I’m not always going to be here for you. So make your decisions, and make sure you feel that they are proper ones.”

This parent viewed making the decision as an important developmental opportunity for her daughter. Similarly, a parent of a student in a school theater production of *Les Miserables* said, “The only role that I play, and I continue to play, is that I support whatever decisions he makes for his life and for whatever he wants to do. As long as it’s legal [chuckles].” These parents supported their teenagers’ decision as a chance for them to make autonomous personal decisions and learn from them.

In sum, youth and parents in this group agreed that participation in the program was a decision over which the youth could exercise autonomy. In Smetana’s (2002) terms, both viewed this decision as within the youth’s personal jurisdiction. But unlike some other areas of autonomy negotiation, such as cleaning one’s room or choosing a hair style, parents had not simply conceded authority, they endorsed youth’s decision as one that would facilitate their development including their development of self-reliance. The goals of youth and parents were the same.

Adolescent-parent interactions as youth participated in the program

As youth in this non-conflictual group then participated in the program, their parents supported this participation as an arena for youth’s exercise of autonomy. Three themes emerged from the coding, first, that parents provided scaffolding for youth’s independence within the program,

second, that some parents granted youth new freedoms to facilitate youth's participation, and third that both parties recognized boundaries on parents' involvement in the programs.

Parental scaffolding of youth's independence

Marco, an urban youth from a Mexican American family, described receiving support from his father when he started Art First during middle school:

My mother and father were at first reluctant to let me come because it was near the Loop, and far away from home, and they were just a little worried. But they didn't want to keep me so sheltered where they would give me a ride and I wouldn't get to experience everything. The first few days my dad took the train with me to help me see where I would get off. To make sure I had every detail down. Then I took the train by myself.

Marco's parents provided scaffolding that allowed Marco to learn to get to Art First on his own.

As youth's participation continued, parents provided ongoing scaffolding for the youth's independent involvement in the program. In a separate article we analyzed the different kinds of support that parents provided, such as verbal support, transportation, and attending events (Jarrett et al., [in process](#)). Some of this support provided assistance in ways that facilitated the youth's independence. For example, a young woman in Harambee said her mother provided encouragement by asking to hear about everything that happened in the program. But she also said "my mom lets me experience my own experiences, because she knows that I am going to have to do it one day." A mother at Youth Builders said, "I let them do it on their own level, you know. I know when to push and when not to push." These parents appeared to be providing support in ways that encouraged the youth's autonomy.

The kind of scaffolding these parents provided fits the concept of "autonomy support": responsive, flexible, and affirming behaviors through which parents, teachers, or coaches facilitate young people's exercise of responsible independence (Reeve, 2002; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Parents provided assistance as needed in ways that facilitated youth's autonomy within the arena defined by the program. A young woman at Art First compared the scaffolding she received from her parents to learning to ride a bicycle.

Like they had training wheels with me and they held my hand and they held the bike and they just took off the training wheels and just let me go. And they're standing there at the doorway, you know, looking down at me at the block, if I fall, they'll run and help, but if I don't then, they'll just let me be.

Granting youth new freedoms

The support that parents provided sometimes included adjusting their rules regarding the teen's behavior. A youth at Les Miserables said his parents made an exception to his curfew so he could attend evening rehearsals. Several young women at El Concilio reported that their parents would not let them go out in public but would let them come to the program. One explained:

My parents, they're really strict on me, and they won't let me go out with friends because they think it's—they don't know my friends, and they don't know how they are. So here, they know everybody, and they would trust me coming here.

For some parents granting this freedom involved progressive trust-building with youth. One mother had a night job and described being initially wary of allowing her daughter, Monique, to attend SisterHood: "I had to trust her with my key to my house, as well as trust her to go to the program and come home without having any problems." But she reported coming to trust Monique to do this, and at the end of our study, Monique reported that her mother was showing greater confidence in her.

Youth and parents defined boundaries on parents' involvement

At the same time that parents provided autonomy support and new freedom, they also recognized limits on their own involvement in the program. It was understood that parents came to special program activities when youth invited them, but they should not intrude or be more involved in the program than youth desired.

Some youth articulated boundaries on their parents' participation in the program. Asked what level of involvement he wanted from his parents, a youth at Art First said, "I like what they're doing now." I like to be left alone for the most part, you know, and be on my own. Similarly, Asha at SisterHood said of her mother, "I think she's just fine where she is, at home, because I think that that would be so tiring to constantly be seeing your own mom. If you she comes up here once in a while, that's pretty good, but I don't want her here all the time."

Asha's mother and other parents reported respecting boundaries on their involvement in and knowledge of the program. They tried to come when there were special events for parents or when their children asked them to come, but it would be inappropriate for them to be over-involved. A

parent of a young man in the school production of *Les Mis-erable* said:

At the end of the year they have a thespian induction program where the parents come and you know you celebrate the honors and the points they have earned, but for the most part, it's pretty much a student-teacher thing.

This parent recognized that the program as an arena of independence for her son. A parent of a youth at El Concilio commented that the leaders and youth had information that was confidential from parents and said, "that is okay." The program was a domain in which not everything was shared with parents.

Research on how adults support youth's autonomy development indicates that it includes not just actions adults *do*, but things they *do not do* (Hauser, 1991; Reeve, 2002). Parents in the non-conflictual group provided active support through scaffolding the youth's participation and adjusting rules. But they also respected the program as a separate arena in which the youth's development was served by their limiting their involvement.

Youth's development of self-reliance

Consistent with parents' expectations, participation in the programs was associated with developmental changes in the youth. Both youth and parents reported that the youth acquired new skills and dispositions, including those related to self-reliance. In separate analyses we have systematically documented the developmental processes through which youth in the programs reported developing initiative (Larson et al., 2005a,b), becoming more responsible (Wood et al., 2006), developing abilities for emotional management (Larson and Brown, 2006), and gaining other abilities and personal resources that made them more capable of personal autonomy (Larson et al., 2004).

What is most relevant for our topic here is that the great majority of parents perceived these changes in the youth. When they were asked if their children had changed as a result of participation, parents reported having seen influences across many developmental domains, including self-reliance (see examples in Table 2). Many stated that their son or daughter had become more responsible and self-regulated as a result of the program. They perceived changes in their child's capacity to manage time, control emotions, handle stress, and resist peer pressure. They also attributed participation in the program to making youth more socially confident and displaying mastery in adult situations, as well as improving their motivation. These parental perceptions are important not only because they validate the youth's reports,

Table 2 Parents' reports of youth's development of self reliance through the program

Responsibility and Self-regulation

Well she has changed a lot, she has become more responsible, she has taken her school serious and she is really interested in going to college. (Harambee)

I have seen a big change, . . . it changes a lot of their attitudes, you know, you can tell they're kinda watching what they say and everything and they know they can't behave any kind of way and they're very respectful you know. (Youth Builders)

She is not as uptight as she used to be, having negativity going on, rage perhaps. She used to get upset a lot, not tantrums, but she would just be in an edgy mood. But it has decreased a lot. And I think that has changed her by going to the program. (SisterHood)

Social Confidence

I think it helped Dan, I don't want to say come out of his shell, but be able to talk better with people. I mean, the guy sat here in our living room and he was asking Dan about LDP payments and records and all kinds of questions, and Dan knew all the answers. Dan had to learn all that stuff, because of [FFA activities], you know? (Clarkston FFA)

You know, I never did think that he would be able to stand up and give a talk or presentation, and he does that just fine. (Faith in Motion)

I think that she has become much more confident, in her ability to work with other people. Now she'll go and talk to the Rotary Club, and you know, whenever a production is coming up she's one of the kids that's called on to go and talk about whatever play or production they're doing. And it doesn't bother her in the least. You know, she doesn't get nervous at all about that kind of thing. (Les Miserables)

Motivation

He is just working a little harder at what he was doing. (Clarkston FFA)

It has changed her enthusiasm. She is more social, she has more friends, she is needed for many things. More responsible. (El Concilio)

but because they potentially influence how parents relate to their children.

Feedback on adolescent-parent relationships

The question of whether youth's development of self-reliance in the program feeds back on the family was a critical one to our analyses. Smetana's (2002) research indicates that family autonomy is negotiated across multiple domains, which do not necessarily influence each other. Parents' may sanction a youth's independence in one domain but not in others. We were interested in whether youth's experience of self-reliance in the program influenced adolescents' independence with their parents beyond this one arena.

Not all but many youth in the non-conflictual group reported that the program had affected their relationship with their parents more generally. Some said their parents had

gained increased appreciation for their development as an independent person. Asked whether participation had influenced his relationships with his family, a young man at The Studio, a media arts program, said: “In a way, yeah, because they’re noticing what I want to do for life. They notice that I want to work with music, period, throughout my whole life. So it’s like they support me.” Another youth from The Studio, Jamar, gained recognition from his family when he volunteered to do the obituary for his grandmother. The adult leader recounted how he had used skills from the program to do this:

He brought in pictures of his Grandmother, he scanned them in, he printed some out, and then he took the design’s to the printer and the printer did the rest. He [also] made some memorial t-shirts for him and his sister and his mom, with his Grandmother’s picture on them. I think that really made him feel good because he can go back to his family and they can see that he’s accomplishing something.

Later Jamar confirmed that participation in The Studio had increased the respect he got from his parents: “Coming here helped me to get even more [respect] because they’re seeing that I got leadership. I can do things. I can do things without my parents.” The program helped parents see their children as competent, independent people.

Youth also reported that experiences in the program had influenced them to take more responsibility at home. When asked if Media Masters had influenced his interactions with his parents, one member said, “Now I do more than my chores, I help them out with their chores as well.” Similarly, a young woman said that as a result of her participation in Faith in Motion:

I’ve had to learn how to preplan things like homework and chores and devotions and then I also have to like be responsible as a daughter and call my parents and tell them I’m taking the car to go to dance practice and I’ll be home around this time. So now I always call my parents and tell them where I’m at and everything like that.

As a result of the program, this youth was engaging in more independent behavior, but she had also become more conscientious in communicating with her parents.

Some youth became more assertive in their interactions with their parents. In several families, youth brought home ideas and opinions from the program and championed them in discussions with their parents. For example, a mother of two youth at SisterHood said:

Not each week, but especially if they had a speaker, a lot of times they talk about what their speaker had to say on different things. So they can come in and they

have a discussion. You know, I agree on some things, I disagree on others. They bring in their points, “Hey this is the way it is,” and I bring in my points, and it is a nice conversation, a nice debate.

The ideas her daughters brought home allowed them to engage in debate with their mother as equals, in ways they had not done before. One of the daughters described the change process:

When you come from a group being as like mature as we are, you know speaking on adult topics, and going home and hearing that mom says, “Wow,” not only does the group have a big effect on you but it has to be having a big effect on your family.

She perceived that her mother was treating her with more respect, that their relationship was changed so that she could express her own views on these topics.

Some youth also were more assertive with their parents about rights and privileges. Carmen at El Concilio reported that the confidence she had developed in the program made her more direct in approaching her parents about things she wanted to do.

Before I wouldn’t dare ask them to go the movies with my friends, and now it’s just like, “Can I go to the movies?” I don’t hold it back. Because I tell them that I’m not a little kid anymore, and they have to let go.

With this more forceful approach, Carmen reported that her parents more often let her do things. The self-assurance that youth developed at the programs carried home in ways that gave them more independence in relation to their parents.

Conclusion: The non-conflictual pathway

What our analyses suggest, then, is that for youth in the non-conflictual group participation in the program provided a venue for a sequence of processes that led to youth’s progressive development of both more personal and family autonomy. Parents supported youth’s independent decision to join the program and provided scaffolding and support for their program participation as an arena of independence. This participation was related to youth developing greater self-reliance, and in some cases this fed back into their family resulting in them having higher and more independent status in relationships with their parents. An important point is that, while youth reported that program participation often meant they spent less time with their families, some said it also made them closer to their parents. Program participation was an arena for development of greater autonomy from family, but this autonomy occurred within a context of continued, if not stronger, family connection.

Another important point is that, for this group of youth, these developmental processes appeared to occur without notable adolescent-parent tension. Although scholars now agree that major conflict often has negative consequences for youth-adult relationships, some have retained the idea that more temperate conflict may help the autonomy process (Collins, 1995; Offer et al., 2004; Steinberg, 2005). Yet it is notable that for this large group of youth, autonomy transactions around youth's participation in programs did not engender or appear to require conflict. The reason, we think, is that youth and parents shared the same goals. Both wanted adolescents to become more independent, and the programs provided a safe arena in which they could develop this independence with parents' endorsement and support.

Alternative pathways

In some families, however, different forms of conflict, tension, or divergence did occur around youth's participation in the program. We now turn to examining the second conflictual group of youth and parents, and how this conflict was related to the unfolding of adolescent-parent autonomy transactions. Our analyses identified four sub-groups experiencing distinct types of tension related to the program: (a) parental opposition to program participation, (b) youth isolating parents from their program involvement, (c) parents forcing youth to join the program, and (d) parents' over-involvement. Although we have only a small number of cases for each sub-group, the data provide preliminary suggestion of the pathways associated with them.

Parents opposition to the program

The first type of conflict involved parents' opposing or having ambivalent feelings about youth's participation in the program. Parents in this sub-group expressed concerns about the program. Some did not always let the youth go to meetings, for example, as a punishment for misbehavior. We identified eight cases (all but one urban) where parental opposition was reported.

These parents' were concerned partly with the risks associated with their children being away from home, particularly in urban neighborhoods. One youth said that his parents did not trust him to be out on his own, because of his past drug use. In another case, a mother was concerned about her daughter getting involved with men she did not know. The program advisor reported that this mother showed up at a program meeting and started yelling at her daughter for being "all over" a young man; then she took the daughter

home. These parents appeared to be responding to fundamental parental apprehensions about the dangers and temptations youth experience outside their supervision.

Some parents were also concerned about the mission and values of the program. Three members of Youth Action, a program in which youth campaigned for social justice issues, said their parents were opposed to the activities and values of the program. One, for example, said her parents did not like the tolerance for gays and lesbians that she was exposed to. Valerie from Faith in Motion reported that her parents were uncomfortable because the evangelical religious beliefs she was learning differed from their Lutheran and Catholic backgrounds. And several immigrant youth in Art First's career training program reported strong parental concern that they not choose a career in the arts. Olga, the daughter of Lithuanian immigrants, said her parents wanted her to pursue a career in technology or medicine, "They are like, 'Can't you do something else?' and then I would get really mad at them."

Over time, ongoing adolescent-parent interactions led some of these parents to reduce their concerns and see the program as playing a positive role in their teen's life. Maria, at El Concilio, described a change in the attitude of her parents, who were immigrant from Mexico, after she invited them to a parent night and they had seen a presentation on what the group was doing:

Well, now they know what I'm coming to. And I told them that I want to be a social worker, so now they're supporting me because they told me that everything, like every workshop, I can go; everything I can attend, [because] it will help me a lot later on.

As a result of learning about the program and seeing its connection to Maria's future, her parents had come to support her participation. When we interviewed Maria's mother at the end of the research period, she was very positive about the program and credited it with having changed Maria. "Now she observes things more, thinks about things more. She has matured a great deal . . . is more responsible." (translated from Spanish). A "negotiation" had taken place over time that led to Maria's parents recognizing the program as an arena in which she was becoming a more competent and self-reliant person.

Other parents, however, continued to be ambivalent about the program. At the end of our study period, Valerie said she was still working on trying to get her parents' acceptance of the religious values she was developing at Faith in Motion:

I think that my relationship with my parents has gotten both better and worse. It's gotten better because I'm trying to respect them and trying to honor them and just do all these things. But I think that it's gotten a little harder, because there's always that tension there

because we have differences in some beliefs and they have some problems with some of the things I believe as an individual.

Indeed when interviewed at about the same time, her mother expressed concern about the program's negative influence on her. Similarly, after Olga decided to pursue an arts career, she described some acceptance and some ongoing resistance from her Lithuanian parents:

Well my mom knows, she accepts that I do, that I'm happy. As long as I'm happy she's happy. But, she's still frustrated that I wouldn't have become a doctor or lawyer. My dad is still trying to accept it, but not really.

Youth in this sub-group fit a classic model of the autonomy process in which parents have divergent views about their teenagers' activities that create tension and conflict. In some of these cases, parents' opposition and concerns about the program were addressed or resolved, leading to parental acceptance of youth's autonomy. But in others disagreement continued.

Youth isolating parents from their program involvement

A second type of conflict or divergence involved youth deliberately isolating their participation in the program from their families. Youth in this sub-group did not share information with family members, did not invite them to program events, and said they did not want their parents involved. One youth explained, "This is something I just do on my own time," and later he said the program was "just my thing, period." Nine youth (all but two urban) reported isolating their participation from their families in these ways.

For some, this approach was a response to anticipated or actual opposition of their parents to the program. Several youth from Youth Action reported isolating the program from their families. They defined a boundary that excluded parents from involvement in and information about the program. One of these youth said of her mother, "Regardless of what I tell her she's never going to see it so what's the point in me trying." Another young man explained that, "the whole point of Youth Action is to work with the youth and let them do most of it, so I don't really know what role my parents can play. I wouldn't want them to get involved." He seemed to be drawing on the program as ideological support for his independence.

For other youth isolation appeared to be a reaction to a home life from which they wanted to create a barrier. A mother of a youth at Harambee said her daughter uses the program as an "escape": "She uses it just to get away, she would rather be there than be at home." When Daniel from

Harambee was asked if he would like his family to be more involved in the program, he explained:

No, See my family is the type of people you don't tell them, "Oh I'm gonna have this thing. I want you to come" cause you know they act crazy. If you want to see my momma or my step-daddy or somebody in here screaming "Go! Go! Go! Go!" and all, everybody bringing radios and telephones and a whole bunch of kids fighting in the back. You don't want to see all that.

Daniel felt his family's behavior was embarrassing and, therefore, did not want them involved.

Lack of communication with parents did not appear to be an obstacle to these youth developing personal autonomy within the program. They reported gaining capacities for self-reliance like other youth. In fact, Daniel indicated that keeping his parents' isolated helped him grow in self-reliance.

It felt real good. The fact that weren't nobody there, and they ain't nobody helping do none of the stuff I did during the summer. It felt like it was a step up as like being a grown up person, older like, when you step out and do something on your own, that you really don't need help from your parents or nothing.

Daniel went on to say that if his parents had come to the final event they would have appropriated credit from him: "It wouldn't have really felt like I actually did it myself. Everybody be like, 'My son did that.'"

The youth's isolation of their families from the program, however, prevented it from being a venue for changes in their relationship with their parents. Since no information was being exchanged, there was less opportunity for it to influence adolescent-parent transactions. Asked in the final interview whether her parents supported her activities Art First, a young woman said, "They didn't have the opportunity to support me. They are completely oblivious to it, because I haven't told them."

Youth in this sub-group fit another classic pathway of seeking autonomy that involves unilaterally separating oneself from parents. By keeping parents isolated from program participation they preempted the type of parental opposition and conflict encountered by the prior sub-group of youth. These youth's ability to restrict information from their parents indicates that they already had significant autonomy from their families. These may have been youth who had achieved the "early emancipation" described for some urban youth (Jarrett, 1997). And, while the youth's strategy prevented the program from being a venue for development of "autonomy with family connection," it did appear to provide an arena for their further development of capabilities for self-reliance.

Parents forcing youth to join

In the third sub-group, parents coerced youth to join or stay in the program. In most of these cases it was the parent who said they had “made” their child join or had not given her or him a choice. One mother of a youth in Les Miserable reported that during middle school she had “dragged” her son Jack to his first theater audition. In a few cases, it was the youth who reported the coercion. For example, a young woman in the 4-H Federation, Danielle, said, “My parents kind of keep me in it. A couple of years ago I wanted to quit but they wouldn’t let me.” The 4-H leader confirmed, that Danielle’s parents “basically had to shove her towards participating in Federation.” The eight families in which parental coercion was reported came from both urban and rural contexts.

These parents’ gave developmental rationales for this coercion. Jack’s mother recalled, “He didn’t really want to go, but he really did enjoy performing, so this was an avenue for him to get experience and to step up his ability to perform.” Another mother said she made her daughter, Latisha, join SisterHood in order “to get social skills, because she doesn’t talk. She is really really quiet and really introverted, so I wanted her to have a big group, a big positive group.” Though possibly over-zealous, these parents’ objectives were those of “sponsored development” (Jarrett, 1995) or what Lareau (2003) calls “concerted cultivation.” They saw the program as providing developmental opportunities for their children.

In most cases these parents’ developmental objectives appeared to have been realized. Jack now reported being very engaged in theater and recounted having grown in multiple ways through his participation. Latisha, the introverted young woman at Sisterhood said: “When I first started, I really can’t say that I wanted to do it. But now I know what it is like. Every year when SisterHood is over I can say that I want to come back next year.” Both Latisha and her mother reported that she had matured through the program.

Some of these youth did not appear to remember that their parents had made them join, and their current experiences were not distinguishable from those of youth in the non-conflictual pathway. They overcame their initial resistance, became psychologically engaged, and reported positive developmental experiences from their participation. But Danielle, whose parents had “shoved” her into 4-H Federation, was an exception. She reported, “I just kind of sit there and I’ll listen, but I don’t interact with everybody.” We certainly cannot conclude that parents’ forcible placement of youth into a program will guarantee that they become engaged in its developmental opportunities, and parents pressuring youth to stay in might easily prevent it being a catalyst for development of ‘autonomy with connection.’

Parental over-involvement in the program

There were four cases (all from rural programs) where youth indicated parental overinvolvement in the program, and a few other cases when adult leaders reported this occurring. A young woman in Youth Builders said her parents “are kinda involved too much.” Another young woman at Faith in Motion reported that,

Sometimes, if me and my mom have a fight or something, she goes to tell Marilyn [the program leader]. It’s kind of like, “Mom, that was between us, not her. I don’t want Marilyn to look at me differently, and what goes on at home is sometimes not really anybody’s business.”

She felt her mother violated what she saw as the appropriate limits for parental involvement.

For two young women in FFA, the issue was more complex. They wanted their father’s assistance with their FFA agricultural projects because of his expertise as a farmer. But they also felt that their dads too readily got overinvolved. One of these young women, whose father was an honorary life-time member of FFA, described a situation where he “was kind of hoping that I’d need a lot of help, so that we could sit down for hours and he could explain this and that and this and that.” The other young woman reported in her first interview that, “I’d rather do it by myself instead of have him out there yelling at me all the time.”

Both of these FFA youth had responded to their dads’ disposition to overinvolvement by negotiating boundaries. In her final interview, this second young woman described how they had established that her father was involved in some of her FFA activities but not others. She also said, “It’s brought us closer. I never really got along with my dad, but when we’re together more I think it’s so much better.” Similarly, the other FFA youth reported: “There was some bonding, and I think there was respect, more of like an adult mature respect was gained from both of us. You know my dad saw me working and saw me dealing with finances.” Although both of these young women had experienced some tension around their fathers’ participation, they appeared to have achieved greater autonomy with connection.

Since we were not studying competitive activities like sports, we probably did not see the most extreme cases of parent overinvolvement described in the literature (Smoll and Cumming, 2006). But for these more mild cases, it is notable that parents’ over-eagerness provided an opportunity for youth to successfully negotiate boundaries for their autonomy.

Indeed across these four sub-groups, the data suggested that conflict or divergence between parents and youth in relation to the program was not always an obstacle. Moderate conflict could serve as an opportunity for negotiation of autonomy in ways that have been suggested (Collins,

1995; Offer et al., 2004; Steinberg, 2005). In some cases, parents were immovable or youth did not share information with parents that would have allowed for this negotiation. But in others, adolescent-parent differences around the program were resolved in ways that enhanced youth's autonomy.

Conclusion: A pathway of opportunities for autonomy development

These analyses suggest preliminary grounded theory about the processes of autonomy development related to this one arena of adolescents' lives. They suggest how youth's participation in programs provides a set of favorable opportunities for developing personal autonomy and negotiating family autonomy. For some youth, these opportunities involve some form of adolescent-parent conflict or tension. But conflict is not inevitable because youth and parents often have convergent goals. Youth do not need to wrest independence from parents in this domain, because, as we and others have found, parents typically endorse the program as an arena for the youth's autonomy development (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Hutchinson et al., 2003; Jarrett, 1995). This grounded theory is, of course, subject to the limits of the data and the analytic procedures used. It needs to be subject to further test. Nonetheless, synthesizing findings for the different pathways we have looked at, the data suggest that youth programs provide a super-ordinate *opportunity pathway*: a structured sequences of affordances for autonomy processes.

First, the decision to join the program is an opportunity for youth to exercise independent judgment over an important decision that affects their lives. From parents' point of view this is a decision that, compared for example to letting them stay out late at night, carries comparatively few risks yet permits adolescents to experience and learn from the outcomes of their decisions. Exceptions occur, however, when youth are interested in a program with values that differ from parents' or when the program is a gateway to career choices that parents do not approve.

As youth then participate in a program, their participation provides opportunities for youth to develop capacities for self-reliance and personal autonomy. Programs help youth develop responsibility, self-regulation, social confidence, and initiative. In some cases parents provide "autonomy support," which scaffolds youth's development of independence within this arena. In a few cases in our research, youth described developing this self-reliance despite parental opposition or the youth's isolating parents from the program.

Finally, experience in the program can feed back and influence adolescents' autonomy in family relationships. Parents' observation of the abilities youth gain through the program

can give them new respect for the youth's independent competencies. In some cases, the self-reliance youth gain from the program transfers home and make youth more responsible, for example, in doing chores or communicating with parents. Furthermore, participation in the program can give youth new knowledge, confidence and assertiveness that allows them to interact with parents on a more equal basis—and hold their own when parents have differing views. In sum, programs can provide an opportunity pathway, not only for youth's development of self-reliance, but also for their negotiation of autonomy not "from" their families but "with" continuing family connection.

Future research is needed to verify this preliminary conceptualization of an opportunity pathway. First, it is important to assess how frequently these different types of transactions occur across youth in representative samples, and how these rates might differ across diverse youth and programs. Our data suggested little difference in the proportion of urban vs. rural and male vs. female youth in the conflictual and non-conflictual groups. But they suggested that parental opposition to program participation might be more frequent for urban youth, due to safety concerns, and for immigrant parents, for whom program values may conflict with what their goal for their child. Second, the predictive relationships between these different types of transactions deserve systematic testing. A central question is how program participation feeds back on the family and is related to general changes in adolescent-parent relationships. One might ask, for example, how joining a youth program compares with taking a first job or spending increased time with peers in shaping youth's family autonomy.

Third, it is important to give attention to the role of youth programs and their leaders in these autonomy transactions. What active role, if any, should they play in facilitating the positive processes we have observed? How might this role vary as a function of the age, background, and culture of youth and parents? The most challenging issue is, what is their role when adolescents' and parents' view of the youth's program participation diverge? How can leaders be effective in navigating situations in which youth and parents want different things from them?

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