PROMOTING RESILIENCE IN YOUTH THROUGH FACILITATING LEISURE ENGAGEMENT IN SELF-DETERMINED COMMUNITY-SERVING PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT: Many benefits can be realized if youth become involved in community-serving organizations. Clearly, there are positive outcomes to be gained by the community organizations and the population they serve. Yet, youth who become involved are also positioned to developmentally profit from this type of leisure engagement. Benefits gained from participation parallel the characteristics that foster resilience in youth, such as nurturing meaningful adult bonds, increasing a sense of empowerment, and building commitment to prosocial organizations. The multiple stressors found in contemporary society make promoting resiliency important for all youth. However, these outcomes are all the more important for youth in care as they often have fewer opportunities to acquire protective factors known to facilitate resilience. The purpose of this paper is to provide evidential support that building 'resilience capital' in youth is best achieved when youth are allowed and entrusted to develop meaningful community serving projects founded on their ideas for service. The applied implementation of this type of youth directed program facilitation is supported through this paper's exploration of various bodies of literature on, leisure studies, youth resilience, the developmental assets frameworks, and psychological empowerment. Promoting Resilience in Youth through Leisure Involvement.

*KEY WORDS: youth resilience, leisure, empowerment, developmental assets.*

Positive youth development can play an important role in building healthy communities, and voluntary leisure involvement is an ideal context in which to facilitate such development. Accounting for almost 50% of children's time, leisure is an important, although often ignored, context for child and youth development (Caldwell & Baldwin, 2003; Kleiber, 1999). Children and youth typically "try on" different ideas, activities, and social roles during their leisure time. Young people view leisure as a chance to be with friends and to have fun, free from external pressures (Caldwell & Baldwin, 2003). In addition, leisure allows children and youth to express themselves and to develop competencies in various areas of life.

According to Kleiber (1999), over time, leisure interests lead to skills, which lead in turn to commitment, a key component of identity formation (Marcia, 1980). Thus, leisure becomes a context for youth development,

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with particular importance for identity development. It should not be negated, however, that many antisocial behaviors such as underage drinking, substance abuse, and juvenile delinquency (i.e., "the dark side of leisure," Caldwell & Baldwin, 2003, p. 185) typically occur in the context of leisure. While youth involvement in negative leisure choices is acknowledged in leisure studies research alongside positive choices, the beneficial aspects of involvement, such as those to be gained from participating in self-directed community serving projects, are highlighted here.

There are two purposes to this paper. The first purpose is to make linkages between leisure, resilience, developmental assets, and psychological empowerment literature, thus far unexplored, visible. These four bodies of literature are explored with an emphasis on empirical support for the benefits of each and to demarcate the theoretical interrelatedness and benefits of combining them within a model of practice (see Figure 1). The model provides solid foundation for the applied use of a self-directed voluntary engagement intervention as a means of building youth resilience. This is

Figure 1: **Model of Practice**
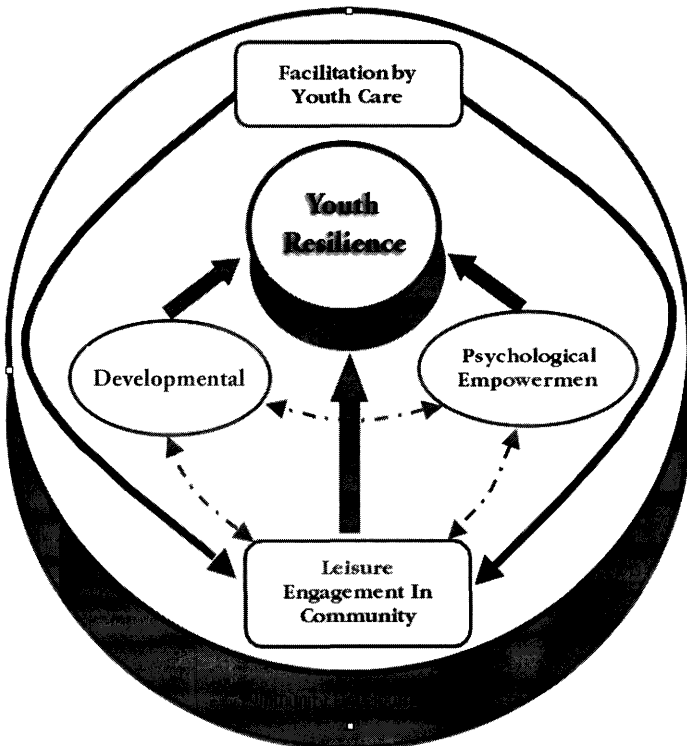
being explicitly articulated to a youth care practitioner audience due to the applied benefits for population these practitioners serve. Essentially, this paper proposes that building youth resilience through voluntary leisure engagement in self-directed community-serving projects (i.e., activities where youth define and develop personally meaningful community-serving projects), cultivates psychological empowerment and enhances the acquisition of developmental assets, therefore promoting resilience. Based on the theoretical evidence, this type of program facilitation is well situated to produce positive outcomes, including fostering youth resilience.

RESILIENCE

Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) defined resilience as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant diversity" (p. 543). Thus, resilience is not a trait of the individual, but a dynamic process that plays out over time. As described by Luther et al. (2000) 'significant adversity' includes stressors such as chronic poverty, parental substance abuse, and family violence/stressors, which children in care often experience. Furthermore, positive adaptation to significant adversity can take a number of forms, dependent on individual circumstances. For example, based on individual context, positive adaptation may mean academic success, avoiding teen pregnancy, or breaking the cycle of abuse.

According to the risk and resilience model, children and youth who are exposed to multiple risk factors may experience compromised developmental outcomes (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). However, youth who demonstrate competence in spite of significant adversity are considered resilient. According to Masten and Coatsworth (1998), protective factors shown to promote resilience in youth are categorized in terms of individual, interpersonal, and societal factors. These include self-esteem, optimism, and good intellectual functioning; support from caring adults and connections to extended family; and socioeconomic advantages such as attending good schools and being involved in prosocial organizations. Upon examination, these protective factors are well aligned with the literature on developmental assets and, as asserted in this paper, leisure involvement provides an ideal context for fostering both.

DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS

Under the *developmental assets* rubric, Peter Benson and his colleagues at the Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, have identified a set of 40 assets that foster positive youth development (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). According to Benson and his colleagues, these assets are associated with three categories of positive mental health outcomes: (a) resilience in the face of adversity; (b) encouragement of positive behaviours

(e.g., school success); and (c) prevention of high-risk behaviours (e.g., substance use). As an extension, the 40 developmental assets are grouped into 20 internal assets and 20 external assets (Benson et al., 1998). Further to this, and of specific relevance to this paper, the 40 assets are placed into eight developmental categories. Internal assets are broken down into four characteristics: *commitment to learning* (e.g., motivation, engagement); *positive values* (e.g., integrity, responsibility); *social competencies* (e.g., interpersonal skills); and *positive identity* (e.g., self-esteem). Similarly, there are four characteristics into which external assets are placed: *support* (e.g., caring school climate); *empowerment* (i.e., a sense of agency); *understanding boundaries and expectations* (i.e., clear and consistent messages); and *constructive use of time* (e.g., involvement in youth programs).

It is asserted here that leisure activities are a context where internal and external assets, and associated characteristics, can be developed as a means of fostering resiliency. The following examples are illustrative of how leisure contexts can specifically develop both internal and external assets. With respect to internal assets (Benson et al., 1998), leisure activities as divergent as creative/artistic expression and involvement in athletics require concentrated involvement and the acquisition of new skills, that is to say, a *commitment to learning*. Although leisure activities in youth can be antisocial in nature, the majority of involvements are prosocial, thereby fostering *positive values*. In addition to the acquisition of technical skills and the development of positive values, leisure affords the attainment of social skills, or in other terms, leisure involvement builds *social competencies*. As previously mentioned, leisure plays an integral role in identity formation (Kleiber, 1999) and the development of a *positive identity*. With respect to external developmental assets (Benson et al., 1998), organized leisure activities typically occur in the context of a teacher, coach, or mentor, affording the opportunity for *support*. Key to the experience of self-determined leisure is a sense of psychological *empowerment* (Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, & Checkoway, 1992). Organized leisure activities, such as sport teams or other group-affiliated forms of leisure, require that participants adhere to rules, conventions, and norms. Put differently, they learn to understand *boundaries and expectations*. Finally, social scientists and educators have argued the need for leisure education for almost a century (Caldwell & Baldwin, 2003; Dewey, 1916), the goal being to teach *constructive use of time*. As has been highlighted throughout this discussion, many of these assets are aligned with the principles of leisure engagement and can be directly developed through such participation. The paper now turns its focus to explaining how facilitating youths' voluntary engagement in self-determined community-serving projects is a fruitful means of developing resilience.

INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY-SERVING ACTIVITIES AS LEISURE

We have noted above that voluntary youth participation in community-serving organizations can foster resilience in the youth involved. As stated, such participation may facilitate the growth of developmental assets and positive factors associated with resilience. However, given that such involvement is voluntarily pursued, it is highly preferable that engagement is experienced as its own reward. In other words, it is essential that activities performed and relationships fostered are conducive to producing an experience whereby voluntary engagement becomes subjectively, as well as objectively, defined as 'leisure'. The theoretical foundation for defining some time as leisure is founded on the individual perception that the activity is freely chosen, self-determined, and intrinsically rewarding (Mannel & Kleiber, 1997).

The result of promoting youth activities that are conceived and perceived as a 'leisure experience' is two-fold. On the one hand, participation may be maximized as youth come to view their voluntary activity as a meaningful and self-satisfying end; on the other hand, self-satisfying engagement may foster youths' continued engagement at the community level, thereby increasing cohesiveness and longevity of community service and therefore betterment of both the individual and the community. Leisure is the mechanism (the process) around which individual and community development may be constructed; "The outcome is the transformation of individuals and their social condition through leisure pursuit and experience" (Reid & van Dreunen, 1996, p. 49).

DEFINITIONAL DETERMINATIONS OF LEISURE

Foremost among the factors that contribute to an activity being deemed a "leisure experience" is the perception of freedom (Iso-Ahola, 1980; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; Neulinger, 1974). This freedom implies not only that the choice is autonomous, but that it is free of constraints that may prohibit or detract from the leisure experience (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991). It is youths' self-determined willingness to participate in what they perceive to be meaningful community activities that determines whether or not an experience is a self-satisfying endeavour deserving of a long-term commitment. Understanding personal voluntary engagement motives is crucial to facilitating autonomous choice such as described above.

There are various motivating factors that determine personal involvement in voluntary activities. Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen (1991) noted 15 specific motives for volunteering, categorizing them into four primary areas encompassing altruistic, egoistic, social, and material/purposive motivations. Each of these four categories may serve to spur involvement in community organizations. Furthermore, it must be noted that an individual does not necessarily act from a solitary motivational category, but rather may

seek concurrent satisfaction in all. Understanding individual motivations for involvement is therefore a crucial step to successful facilitation. Essentially, if interest is going to be fostered, then motivations for involvement must be taken into account as part of successful participation.

Some youth may desire to participate in order to meet people; others may wish to improve their social status through participation; others may wish to help themselves or a particular segment of society; another may seek to satisfy some combination of these or other motives. Of ultimate importance, though, is the degree to which an individual's participation in local development activities may provide a means for the satisfaction of their specific motivational needs. By facilitating perceptions of freedom and fostering the satisfaction of salient needs, the possibility that voluntary activities will be perceived as leisure is maximized. This perception has implications for the level of satisfaction derived, which in turn has consequences for personal development (building resilience) and organizational commitment.

Another defining element of the leisure experience is intrinsic motivation. For activities to be intrinsically rewarding for an individual they must, first and foremost, be of interest to that individual. According to Mannell and Kleiber (1997) if activities are freely chosen and of interest to a person, he or she will also be intrinsically motivated to participate. These authors describe leisure as any activity that is intrinsically rewarding, therefore providing an opportunity for self-development that satisfies the innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This is largely consistent with the principles of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), most notably with regard to the determination of goals (personal meaning), opportunities for self-development (personal development and competence), and community integration (relatedness). It is suggested here that youths' leisure participation within the context of voluntary (self-determined) engagement in community-serving leisure meets the parameter of intrinsic motivation and, therefore, facilitates the development of resilient youth.

Perceptions of participants' satisfaction of needs as part of leisure involvement are largely congruent with enabling the development of resiliency factors, personal assets, and empowerment. Thus, satisfaction fosters intentions to remain engaged in service, increasing the potential that further benefits shall accrue. Reciprocally, increased empowerment encourages increased participation such that, given the right conditions, a reinforcing satisfaction/empowerment loop is created which encourages continued engagement and may help perpetuate the likelihood of building resiliency. As Kiefer (1984) put it:

> the longer the participants extend their involvement, the more they come to understand; the more they understand, the more motivated they are to continue to act; the more they continue to act, the more proactive they are able to be; the more proactive they are able to

be, the more they further their skill and effect; the more they sense their skill and effect, the more likely they are to continue. (p. 22)

CONSTRAINTS TO LEISURE

While successful involvement is dependent on satisfying salient needs, issues of constraints to leisure must also be taken into account when facilitating youth involvement in community-serving activities. Various types of constraints can interfere with successful leisure participation. Knowledge of these factors can help practitioners, and associated care networks, to assist youth to negotiate or even overcome some constraints to participation. As Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991) pointed out, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints can exert an influence both prior to and during engagement in a particular leisure pursuit. Intrapersonal constraints are related to an individual's psychological processes that may affect their predisposition to participation. Internal factors such as personality, attitudes, or mood states may act as constraints. For example, an introverted person may need to develop specific social skills in order to confidently articulate their service project's idea. Interpersonal constraints, generally speaking, relate to interpersonal interactions involving friends, classmates, family, and caseworkers. An example of this is an individual who is chastised by his/her social network for wanting to become involved in serving their community. Finally, structural constraints refer to external factors which intervene between a person's desire to participate in an activity and actual involvement (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991). An example of a structural constraint would be inaccessibility of transportation (due to economic or physical factors) that is required for a youth-developed program designed to make regular visits to a local animal shelter to care for pets. Recognition of possible constraining factors is an important part of creating as many leisure affordances and freedoms as possible for youth. Assisting youth to negotiate constraints requires creative strategies as a means to address, alleviate, or even overcome factors that hinder participation (Jackson & Scott, 1999).

PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

An important goal of the promotion and development of resilience in youth is empowerment. Further to this, it is proposed that voluntary involvement with community service organizations provides a process by which many aspects of resilience can be fostered through the cultivation of developmental assets via leisure involvement, especially in relation to empowerment. Meaningful and self-determined participation allows youth to utilize their many resources and ideas based on their actual needs, and not just organizational or adult conceptions of those needs. As discussed previously, self-determination is also the definitional foundation for leisure involvement and thereby linked to empowerment.

Empowerment is a multifaceted social process that has effects not only at the individual level of analysis, but also at the environmental and community levels. At the individual level, empowerment is a process whereby individuals struggle to reduce personal powerlessness by having increased control over their lives (Lord & Hutchison, 1997; Rappaport, 1987). As Zimmerman (1990) noted, however, "It is important to expand our understanding of empowerment beyond the individual level of analysis" (p. 173) as this may limit the construct by ignoring the contextual considerations. Bailey (1992) supports this suggestion by defining empowerment as dependent on both the specific people (youth in care) and the context involved (community). This paper supports the argument that empowerment should be viewed beyond just the individual level as a means of taking into account the symbiotic connections between youth and their community. As presented here, psychological empowerment has many positive cultural effects on the community.

Understanding empowerment, therefore, requires the recognition that individuals and their community are fundamentally connected. As described in the discussion on resilience, children living in care, by default, have a number of different contextual environments and issues that need to be taken into account if the promotion of resilience in youth is to be achieved. Empowerment theory uses the term *psychological empowerment* to emphasize this association between the individual and the cultural/community context, and distinguishes it from individually oriented concepts of empowerment. Essentially, psychological empowerment highlights the importance of an environment-person fit (Zimmerman et al., 1992).

Psychological empowerment (PE), as conceptualized by Zimmerman et al. (1992), includes three components: *intrapersonal, interactional,* and *behavioral*. The *intrapersonal* component refers to an individual's self-perception of their capacity to influence social or political issues that they deem important. Perceived control, self-efficacy, motivation to effect change, and perceived competence are included within this component. Youth, and more specifically youth in care, have much to gain from psychological empowerment, as they often have low self-esteem, low perceived control, and low sense of competency. As presented here, psychological empowerment also has positive cultural effects on the community.

The *interactional* component consists of an individual's capability to interact in a way that allows them to master social or political systems within their environment. Knowledge of resources necessary for achieving specific goals, and the development of problem-solving and decision-making skills, are essential aspects of achieving a sense of mastery. For example, youth often have limited understanding of resources in their environment, or how community decisions are made. The *behavioural* component relates to the specific behavioural actions that youth take as a means to exercise influence within their given community. Put differently, it refers to how much a person is actually involved in the community.

As suggested by the empowerment theory, it is the convergence of *interpersonal, interactional,* and *behavioral* components that facilitates empowered individuals as well as empowered communities, therefore fitting the definition of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman et al., 1992). As described here, the process of psychological empowerment fosters people's capacity to implement change in their own lives, in their communities, and in society by acting on issues that they define as important. As a result of fostering resilience in youth, vis-à-vis building developmental assets through leisure, youth can actively seek and be assisted to meet their basic needs, thus building on existing individual assets or competencies, as well as meeting the prosocial needs of their environmental context--their community.

One of the main premises of empowerment theory proposes that participation in decision-making enhances a person's sense of empowerment (Kiefer, 1984; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Research now indicates that the development of the intrapersonal component has been shown to increase the likelihood of behavioral action and involvement within communities (Zimmerman et al., 1992). Empowerment research has also shown that highly involved individuals benefit more from their participation than less involved people by learning new skills, gaining informational knowledge, helping others, increasing social contacts, and fulfilling obligations. This finding supports the premise that self-determined leisure involvement in voluntary engagement with community-serving organizations may be helpful by providing a context in which empowerment can be nurtured. As mentioned earlier, for freedom in leisure to occur and for positive benefits to be reaped, constraints must be minimized and/or negotiated.

CONCLUSION

An important focus of this paper has been to make theoretical connections among the concepts of leisure, resilience, developmental assets, and psychological empowerment. As such, the paper is purposefully promoting the applied practice of facilitating leisure involvement as a means of fostering resilience for youth in care. The general premise is this: promoting resilience in youth and building protective factors through facilitating self-determined leisure engagement has the potential to foster growth of developmental assets and psychological empowerment, benefiting both the youth and the communities in which they live.

In conclusion, support for this premise is as follows. First, the risk and resilience model indicates that being involved in prosocial activities--like self-determined leisure--helps to cultivate protective factors that make youth more resilient (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Second, Benson's (1990) research concluded that the more internal and external assets that youth have, the more likely youth will become resilient. These developmental assets essentially parallel the protective factors in the risk and resilience model, aiding youth to positively adapt to adverse life stressors, such as those

found among youth in care. Third, leisure provides a context for fostering both developmental assets and psychological empowerment.

Therefore, leisure engagement initiates the growth of developmental assets, and psychological empowerment (PE) in a positive feedback loop. The expansion of developmental assets and PE, through leisure engagement, strongly supports the notion that this type of youth involvement will foster youth resilience. As an addendum, this type of youth development also builds solidarity between youth and their environmental context, nurturing community cohesion not often found between youth in care and their communities. Engagement in community-serving activities, which youth perceive as intrinsically important, and therefore satisfying their needs, has the potential to achieve not only individual development, but also community development.

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