

# How Youth Get Engaged: Grounded-Theory Research on Motivational Development in Organized Youth Programs

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For youth to benefit from many of the developmental opportunities provided by organized programs, they need to not only attend but become psychologically engaged in program activities. This research was aimed at formulating empirically based grounded theory on the processes through which this engagement develops. Longitudinal interviews were conducted with 100 ethnically diverse youth (ages 14–21) in 10 urban and rural arts and leadership programs. Qualitative analysis focused on narrative accounts from the 44 youth who reported experiencing a positive turning point in their motivation or engagement. For 38 of these youth, this change process involved forming a personal connection. Similar to processes suggested by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), forming a personal connection involved youth's progressive integration of personal goals with the goals of program activities. Youth reported developing a connection to 3 personal goals that linked the self with the activity: learning for the future, developing competence, and pursuing a purpose. The role of purpose for many youth suggests that motivational change can be driven by goals that transcend self-needs. These findings suggest that youth need not enter programs intrinsically engaged—motivation can be fostered—and that programs should be creative in helping youth explore ways to form authentic connections to program activities.

*Keywords:* organized youth programs, psychological engagement, motivation

Organized youth programs, including community programs and school-based extracurricular activities, are contexts that can provide important developmental benefits for adolescents (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009; Zarrett et al., 2009). America's youth programs are second only to public schools in the number of young people they reach: 82% of 12- to 17-year-olds participate in one or more organized program (Child Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2007). Therefore, they have the potential to contribute to the development of many young people. Research also suggests that the relation between program participation and positive outcomes may be particularly strong for youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Mahoney et al., 2009; Marsh, 1992; Pedersen & Seidman, 2005). In order for youth to obtain most of these developmental benefits, however, they need to not only join programs but become psychologically engaged in the programs' activities. By psychologically engaged, we mean being motivated to a degree that their attention is absorbed in the tasks and challenges in an activity (e.g., in creating an effective work of art, learning a software program, providing effective service to the community; cf. Blumenfeld, Kemplar, & Krajcik, 2006).

But how do youth become psychologically engaged? What is the process of motivational change? Although some youth enter

programs with high levels of engagement or motivation in a program's activities (e.g., arts, community service), others join to be with friends, in response to parents' urging, to fulfill a mandatory school service requirement, or for other reasons that may not translate into high levels of engagement in the activities (Herrera & Arbreton, 2003; McLellan & Youniss, 2003; Perkins et al., 2007). To improve the likelihood that all youth will gain the developmental benefits afforded by program activities, researchers should understand the processes through which youth's engagement can develop. Although there is a large body of research and theory on motivation in young people, researchers know little about how motivation (particularly engagement of attention) changes and develops in this or other contexts (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006).

The aim of this investigation was to formulate grounded theory about these change processes from the accounts of youth who reported significant increases in their engagement. We asked what happened within these youth's conscious experiences in programs that "got them motivated," "psyched," or increased their engagement in program activities? In this study, we employed qualitative research methods because we wanted to build a preliminary theory about these processes in context from the vantage point of the people experiencing them (National Institutes of Mental Health Consortium of Editors on Development and Psychopathology, 1999). Knowledge on how youth experience these processes is also more likely to be useful to front-line practitioners trying to facilitate them (Valach, Young, & Lyman, 2002). These methods are those of theory development, not testing; and the findings should be viewed in that light. The programs we studied included arts and leadership programs for urban and rural high-school-aged youth. The sample was selected to include equal numbers of African American, Latino, and European American

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youth and a high number of youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with the objective of being inclusive of groups that have often been underrepresented in studies of adolescent development.

## Background

### Psychological Engagement and Developmental Outcomes in Youth Programs

Research in classroom settings has established a strong positive relationship between motivation and learning (Lepper, Sethi, Daldin, & Drake, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Higher levels of interest, intrinsic motivation, or engagement are related to indicators of more and deeper level learning (Blumenfeld et al., 2006; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Parallel research on youth programs has been limited; nonetheless a handful of studies suggest a similar relationship between psychological engagement and developmental outcomes. In a longitudinal study, Mahoney, Parente, and Lord (2007) found that observational ratings of children's ( $M$  age = 8.4 years) engagement (paying attention, demonstrating interest in the activities) in nine after-school programs were related to significant increases in leader-rated social competence and in effectance motivation (the intrinsic pleasure a child derives from solving difficult problems) over a school year. Shernoff (2010) showed that middle school students' reports of psychological engagement during program activities (obtained through experience sampling) mediated the relationship between program participation and social competence. Lastly, in a large computer-assisted survey, Hansen and Larson (2007) found that when high school students indicated being intrinsically motivated in a youth program, they reported having significantly more positive developmental experiences. Thus, there is good reason to posit that high engagement and motivation in program activities is related to positive developmental outcomes.

This motivation or engagement, however, does not occur for all youth who join programs. It might be expected for those who enter with a previously developed interest in the program's activities, or for those who had formative experiences that dispose them toward these activities (e.g., when parents have interest in arts, sports, or activism; Youniss & Yates, 1997). But other youth join for reasons that are extrinsic to the activity itself—to affiliate with friends (e.g., Patrick et al., 1999; Persson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2007) or in response to incentives like stipends and school service requirements (Herrera & Arbretton, 2003; McLellan & Youniss, 2003). These youth may be less likely to be engaged and less likely to benefit from program activities unless their engagement develops (Deschenes et al., 2010; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005). Thus, a challenge faced by stakeholders is to learn how to promote psychological engagement, especially among youth who join for reasons extrinsic to program activities. The current study was aimed at understanding how this process occurs.

### Theories of Psychological Engagement

To obtain conceptual background for this study, we reviewed existing motivational theories that might be useful in interpreting youth's accounts of changes in their psychological engagement.

The principle focus of most current literature on motivation is not on engagement but rather on factors that influence individuals' decisions about the future, most often about school and career choices (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield et al., 2006). However, some of the factors found to influence these decisions—individuals' values, short- and long-term goals, expectations about their performance in an activity, prior experiences, self-beliefs, parents' beliefs—may also directly or indirectly influence the development of engagement. Eccles's (2005) expectancy-value theory provides a useful inclusive empirically based framework that integrates many of the factors that predict performance, persistence, and task choice into a single model.

Given our focus on psychological engagement, we drew mostly from three motivation theories that deal with engagement and provide ideas about how it might develop. To begin with, flow theory suggests that deep engagement (the subjective state of *flow*) occurs when a person experiences the challenges in the activity as matched to his or her skills (i.e., the challenges are not too hard or easy relative to her or his skill level; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). An important caveat, however, is that for a person to see the tasks in an activity as "challenging" (i.e., to want to take these tasks on), it is not enough that the tasks present some difficulty or problem to be addressed; addressing that difficulty needs to have meaning to the person.

Interest theory also suggests that tasks need to be personally meaningful for engagement to occur. The psychological state of *interest* is similar to flow; it involves "focused attention, increased cognitive functioning, persistence and affective involvement" (Hidi, 2000, p. 312). This theory posits that, although this state can be temporarily triggered by a novel activity, for interest to be sustained over time, a person needs to gain a base of knowledge about the activity and develop positive subjective feelings toward it (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

Self-determination theory (SDT) postulates that sustained psychological engagement in an activity requires that the activity be associated with more than just meaning or positive feelings; the activity must be integrated into the self. According to SDT, psychological engagement varies as a function of how much a person has internalized the goals of the activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A person experiences amotivation when there is no extrinsic or intrinsic relationship between the activity and the goals or needs of the self. Increased motivation and engagement occurs on a continuum as a person identifies with, internalizes, and integrates the activity's goals into the self system. The strongest motivation occurs when participation in an activity is completely internally regulated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT, then, suggests processes that might be necessary for the development of psychological engagement. Ryan and Deci (2000) also drew on research to posit that these processes of internalization are driven by three basic universal psychological needs of the self for: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Our principle goal in this research was to develop grounded theory of how engagement develops based on youth's accounts; however, we drew on these theories as they were useful in interpreting and integrating patterns in these accounts (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). In addition to the theories already mentioned, we discovered and drew on several additional theories after our

analyses (e.g., Damon, 2009), as described in the Results and Discussion sections.

### This Research

Our research program began with a pilot study in which we formulated a preliminary conception of how engagement developed among youth in one activism program (Pearce & Larson, 2007). The 10 African American and Latino youth in the pilot study reported joining the program to fulfill a school service requirement, and their starting levels of motivation and engagement were low. But they reported a transformation to becoming highly engaged. Analysis of the youth's accounts of this change indicated that the central process involved their formation of a personal connection to the moral, social change mission of the program. The youth's description of this change process included elements similar to concepts in SDT. Youth formed a personal connection to the program when they internalized the moral objectives of the program's activities. Although moral ends are not one of the basic psychological needs in SDT, youth described coming to experience these goals as personally meaningful. We speculated that different forms of personal connections might drive motivational change in other types of organized programs, such as to career goals or to completing an artistic production (Pearce & Larson, 2007).

The objective of the current investigation was to evaluate and extend this preliminary theory of how youth's engagement develops. We sought, first, to evaluate the possibility that forming a personal connection could explain increased psychological engagement across a broad range of youth and programs. If so, we second wanted to identify what different forms of personal connection might be involved.

To address these two questions, we examined data from youth participating in 10 diverse high-quality arts and leadership programs. These programs were selected as part of a larger study aimed at understanding not just development of engagement but development of responsibility, strategic thinking, and emotional competencies as described in other research reports (Larson & Angus, in press; Larson & Brown, 2007; Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009). High-quality programs were selected to maximize the likelihood of observing the different change processes we sought to evaluate and explain. We chose programs that were project based, because they involve working toward goals, and research suggests that this feature is most likely to facilitate positive development (Durlak et al., 2010; Granger, 2008).

To understand the process of motivational change, we employed the analytic technique of examining turning points. This technique involves identifying "consequential shifts" in people's experiences, then analyzing their accounts of these shifts (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). There is a long tradition of researchers using turning points in a person's life as an anchor for examining transitions in mental processes and subsequent life course (e.g., Kray et al., 2010; McAdams, 2001). For these analyses, we selected a subsample of youth who articulated a distinct positive change in their psychological engagement, and we employed tools of systematic grounded theory analysis to evaluate their descriptions of how the change occurred and the different forms it took.

## Method

### Programs

Data were collected as part of a larger study of developmental processes in organized programs. Youth and leaders in 10 programs were followed over time to obtain their accounts of ongoing motivation and engagement. Youth in these programs worked on arts projects (e.g., murals, drama, music, and video productions) and leadership or civic-focused (4-H, community service) projects. To obtain diverse high-quality programs, we followed techniques developed by McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994). We first contacted youth development professionals in urban and rural communities to obtain recommendations on high-quality programs in their area. We then visited those programs suggested by at least two professionals, observed program sessions, and talked with staff and youth. We selected those that met a list of criteria associated with high-quality programs (e.g., youth were in engaged in structured projects, our observations and discussion with youth indicated that they were highly motivated, program leaders had a youth-centered philosophy, leaders had been in their roles for at least two years (Durlak et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 2000). Youth were followed for natural periods of program participation lasting from two to nine months (e.g., a summer session, a semester, a school year). Table 1 provides a summary of information on each program (all names of programs, youth, and leaders used in this article are pseudonyms).

### Research Participants

The goal for sample selection within each program was to obtain a subset of youth who were representative of the programs' members. The leaders were asked to help us select 8–13 youth at each program who were representative of members in gender, age, ethnicity, and years of experience in the program. The total sample from the 10 programs included 100 youth (55 young women). The mean age was 16 (range = 14–21). The group was diverse with respect to ethnicity (there were 38 European Americans, 29 African Americans, 26 Latinos, two Asian Americans, three biracials, and two who gave no response). Thirty-eight percent of the youth lived in census tracts with a median household income below \$30,000, 41% had a median household income between \$30,000 and \$45,000, 20% had a median household income between \$45,000 and \$60,000, and only one had a median household income above \$60,000.

### Data Collection

The youth were interviewed at regular intervals over the study period for each program. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the study period and lasted about 60 min. These interviews provided opportunities for direct contact with the youth and adult leaders, which facilitated building and sustaining rapport. Shorter phone interviews (approximately 15–20 min) were conducted during the intervening intervals. For most programs, these occurred on a biweekly schedule. For the two summer programs, which met daily, these phone interviews were conducted every 1.5 weeks, and for two programs that were studied for nine months, these interviews were done on a monthly

Table 1  
*Description of Youth Programs*

Program	Program activities	Ethnicity of youth	Study period	No. of youth interviewed (with turning point)
Community based				
Art First: Art; career development	Arts and arts-career activities, including painting a mural, taking part in arts internships, and informational sessions on arts careers	African American, European American, Asian American, Latino	4 months, summer 2002	11 (3)
Faith in Motion: Faith-based dance troupe	Dance performances and competitions, devotional time	African American, European American	4 months, fall 2003	9 (6)
Prairie County 4-H Federation: Chapter of 4-H Federation	Leadership focused activities, such as planning and attending local and regional workshop emphasizing leadership development and social network building	European American	9 months, school year 2003–2004	8 (4)
The Studio: Urban youth development agency	Leadership and vocational development activities, such as producing, engineering, and designing graphics for a music CD	African American, Latino	3 months, spring 2004	10 (3)
El Concilio: Youth council	Leadership focused activities, including planning and attending community service events	Latino	4 months, fall 2004	10 (6)
SisterHood: General club	Leadership and consciousness raising activities, including discussions, planning and going on field trips	African American girls	9 months, school year 2004–2005	11 (5)
School based				
Clarkston FFA: Chapter of National FFA Organization	Agriculture-focused projects and regional contests emphasizing vocational and leadership development	European American	4 months, spring 2002	11 (6)
Les Miserables: Drama club	Spring musical rehearsals and final presentation	European American	4 months, spring 2003	10 (4)
Media Masters: Media arts program	Skill and leadership development activities, such as video production and Web design projects	Latino	3 months, fall 2003	8 (2)
Harambee: Nonprofit youth development organization; summer employment component	Leadership focused activities, such as producing a documentary video, researching city transit issues	African American	2 months, summer 2004	10 (5)

schedule (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted by trained graduate students, undergraduate students, and postdoctoral fellows. We paired youth with an interviewer of the same gender and ethnicity as much as possible to facilitate rapport building. The same interviewer conducted all the interviews with the youth. Across the 10 programs, 584 interviews were completed with the 100 youth. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Semistructured protocols were used in the interviews with the objective of obtaining youth's accounts of their experiences. Interviewers were encouraged to probe to obtain a full understanding of youth's responses to questions in the written protocol (Miles &

Huberman, 1994). The primary questions about motivation and engagement were in the initial, midpoint, and final interviews (although interviewees also provided spontaneous information about their motivation across all interviews). The motivation questions included the following (see the Appendix for the full set): "Sometimes the reason someone starts an activity and the reason they continue in it are different. How have your reasons for being in the program changed since you first started?" and "In general how has your motivation changed since we started talking? What was it about [the program] that contributed to this change?" (Note that we used the term *motivation* in the interviews and our de-

scription of the results in a colloquial way that denotes motivation in an activity, i.e., psychological engagement.)

### Analyses of Data

The analyses of these data involved five steps. First, we identified all interview passages relevant to motivation and engagement in the program. Criteria for inclusion included youth statements about their (a) reasons for joining the program, (b) reasons for taking on new activities within the program, (c) decisions to remain involved or disengage from program activities, and (d) changes in motivation/engagement.

Second, we identified those youth who reported an increase in psychological engagement or motivation by looking for positive turning points in each participant's accounts. Our criterion for identifying turning points was youth's use of "before and after" language to explain changes in their level of engagement/motivation in the program. For example, many youth described the changes using phrases such as "At first . . . but now" and "In the beginning . . . but now." The "at first" and "in the beginning" statements were followed by youth's descriptions of their initial reasons for joining or previous level of interest, while "but now" was followed by descriptions of a higher level of motivation or engagement. We assessed interrater reliability by having two coders independently evaluate whether youth's responses to questions about motivational change met these criteria. These independent evaluations showed substantial agreement ( $\kappa = .80$ ). (In instances when raters disagreed, the final classifications were determined through discussion.) Forty-four youth were identified as reporting a turning point in their engagement or motivation toward the program. These youth did not differ markedly from other youth by gender (61% were female), age ( $M = 16.1$  vs. 16.4), ethnicity (42% were European American, 33% were African American, and 24% were Latino), being in an urban versus rural program (47% attended a rural program), or arts versus leadership programs (34% attended arts programs).

The third step, then, focused on the first research question: Did the positive changes for these 44 youth involve forming a personal connection to program activities? We read through each youth's pertinent data and categorized their explanations for their change. For each youth, we asked the following: Did her or his account of increased engagement/motivation involve the formation of a personal connection to the program activities? Our operational definition of forming a personal connection was developed through an iterative process, beginning with the definition used in the pilot study and revised by us after preliminary reading of the new data:

The process of coming to experience program activities as having important relevance and meaning to their lives. This relevance or meaning may be related to personal values or standards, personally meaningful interests or ambitions, or personal identity.

Each youth's explanation was coded as either involving or not involving a personal connection. Independent coding of data for the 44 youth showed adequate reliability ( $\kappa = .77$ ).

In the fourth step—addressed as the second research question—we developed coding categories for the types of personal connections that youth reported forming. In an iterative process, operational definitions were created for each emerging category; these were used to code each youth's primary explanation for his

or her motivational change; and, as warranted, further revisions were made in the operational definitions (Berg, 2004). Three distinct categories emerged that fit the operational definition of personal connection. Independent coding showed high reliability ( $\kappa = .92$ ). The frequency of these three types of personal connection did not clearly differ by youth's age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status of neighborhood, or reason for joining. Differences by type of program are reported below.

In the final step of the analyses, we evaluated the variety of accounts in each category and choose representative quotes to describe that variety in the text below. Our aim in this process was to communicate youth's accounts of their subjective experience of change in their own words, as situated in program activities.

## Results

### Forming a Personal Connection

The first question was whether youth's experience of increased engagement involved the process of forming a personal connection to program activities. The analysis found that among the 44 youth who reported increased engagement/motivation, 38 explained the change in a way that fit the operational definition of forming a personal connection (illustrative examples are presented in the next section). These youth attributed their increased engagement to experiencing a change in the personal relevance or meaning of the program activities: The activities had acquired greater significance to their personal values, ambitions, or identity. Youth described this personal connection as occurring through changes in both themselves (developing knowledge, skills, values, future goals) and in their perception of the activity (seeing new things in it, learning its relevance to goals). The process appeared to involve experiencing increased convergence between self and the activity.

The explanations of the six other youth did not fit the operational definitions of personal connection. The accounts of most of these youth centered on positive changes in their relationships and interactions with peers in the program, not on the program activities. For instance, Chernise attributed her increased engagement in SisterHood to positive experiences with the other youth: "When I went, it was just this new, different experience with nice, friendly girls my age that I was not really used to." This source of motivation—peer affiliation—may increase youth's level of attendance and engagement with peers but not necessarily their engagement in and learning from program activities (Hansen & Larson, 2007).

### Types of Personal Connection

Our second question concerned the types of personal connections the 38 youth formed. The analyses found that these connections fit into three categories defined by three goals held by the youth: learning for the future, developing a sense of competence, and pursuing purpose. Each category reflected distinct ways in which program activities had gained personal relevance.

**Learning for the future.** The largest number of youth (17 from eight programs) attributed the change in their psychological engagement to a connection they discovered between the skills they were learning through participating in program activities and goals for their future. Most of these youth reported joining for

reasons that were extrinsic to the activity, including parents' encouragement, being recruited by program leaders, and the desire to be with friends. But they said their engagement or motivation in the activity became stronger as they realized that they were gaining knowledge, exploring, and developing skills that would be valuable to them later, often for a desired college major or career choice. Their psychological engagement in program activities was now supported by their experience of obtaining skills that connected them to valued life goals.

For most youth, the personal connection was to activities related to a specific vocational area. Jose from Art First described his increased engagement: "At first it was just more for fun, just to go and do some artwork and stuff. But now I really want to do art a lot more, like [be] an art major at school." LaRoy joined The Studio when they offered a session on music production in which students were paid to attend. But he continued, taking a new unpaid session, because the program got him thinking about a career in computer technology, and he was developing competencies in this area. He said, "They're showing me new steps and things that I want to do and learn about. That's the reason why I'm here, I mean and it's fun. It's interesting." Rachel joined the Clarkston High School FFA, an agricultural leadership program, to affiliate with boys, but the program activities, such as planning agriculture-related events for young children, became more meaningful when she linked the skills she was learning to a future career in teaching. She explained,

It's not just about the guys anymore. It's more the things I get out of it now, instead of just seeing people. I am going to be a teacher and so I was able to help plan a day camp [for fourth graders] and so that will give me, like, skills hopefully that I need to be a good teacher.

For these youth, experience in the program connected them to work they were thinking they wanted to do for the rest of their lives.

Victor from Art First described his increased engagement in a way that demonstrated how self-regulating the connection to his future had become. He had joined after he heard about the program from his friends. But he started to connect his activities in the program (painting, interacting with adult artists) to his emerging identity as an artist. He explained his newfound motivation this way:

To me [the program] is very important, because I need to learn new techniques, and I need to gain the experiences . . . I need to know what kind of different medias are out there and how I can incorporate them into everything that I love. And just experiment with everything, so I can see what's going to be my thing. Because every artist has his own style and his own personal favorite media.

Victor now regulated his activities in the program in accordance with his goal of self-realization as an artist.

In sum, youth in this category became engaged in program activities because they came to see that they were learning new skills and gaining experiences that served their futures. They may have joined for extrinsic reasons, but these were replaced by more powerful motives that connected the activities to personally meaningful life goals. In separate analyses focused on examining how youth programs help youth think about career choices, Rickman (2009) described the youth's process as that of "finding fit": It involved a dual process of learning about potential career oppor-

tunities through the program and evaluating how these matched their own skills and interests.

**Developing a sense of competence.** A second group of youth (six from three programs) attributed their increased psychological engagement to the sense of competence they were developing as a result of doing well in program activities. While the prior group of youth made connections to the future, these youth made connections to goals in the present. Doing well in program activities—and having that acknowledged by others—provided meaningful self-affirmation. This experience of competence connected youth to program activities and fueled motivation to pursue new challenges in the program.

Dave, a member of the FFA program, stated that he joined primarily because he had "always been around agriculture" and wanted to participate in an activity with which he was familiar. He reported that he had won several FFA contests (such as Poultry Judging, Horticulture, and Agriculture Mechanics), which he said was unexpected. The experiences positively impacted his engagement in the program. He explained: "I started doing it. I started doing it pretty well, so that got me more motivated to do more." He had won state-level competitions and had set his sights on winning the coveted "Star Farmer" title at the next competition. Haley, one of his peers, also explained how she "did pretty good" in her competitions, which "really got [me] going and [I] wanted to do more." Thomas, who was in a high school production of *Les Miserables*, described his experience of getting positive feedback on his performance as the character Javert and how it fueled his increased engagement developing the role. For instance, he said

I've been told that I'm really scary and people keep saying, "Oh, you're doing such a great job!" So it's fun! It's just so fun and I guess, because I'm doing such a good job at it, it's even more so now.

Substantial evidence suggests that experiencing competence is a basic human psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and activities in the programs appeared to provide these youth a conscious sense of competence. Doing well, getting affirmation from others, and having opportunities to repeat these experiences appeared to have increased these youth's engagement in programs' activities.

**Pursuing purpose.** The third group of youth (15 across four programs) attributed their increased psychological engagement to forming personal connections to goals that transcended their own self-interest. For youth in three leadership and service programs, these were moral, civic, and social change goals (similar to those that engaged youth in our pilot study). For youth in a faith-based program, it also included religious goals. The motivation to work toward these goals fit Damon's (2009) definition of *purpose*. It involved "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential to the world beyond the self" (p. 121).

Youth in the leadership programs (El Concilio, Harambee, and FFA) attributed their increased engagement to the personal connection they formed to the service, civic, and social change goals of their programs. The youth in El Concilio planned events aimed at keeping young people out of gangs. Jennifer said that initially she just "wanted to get the [service] hours and then quit," but she became engaged and "interested in all the subjects [they were] talking about." She explained, "I realized that a lot of kids have been dying because of the gangs, and I want to stop that." In Harambee, Clive stated that when he joined, he was "not passion-

ate about the issues.” But his engagement in the program’s activities changed when he identified with the moral and social justice purpose behind their work. He said, “I didn’t care at first until I heard some people who spoke about some real problems and issues that I thought were wrong.” Roger, another youth at Harambee, said his increased engagement in the work of the program occurred when he “learned the true meaning of it. You’re actually helping people, not just getting paid.” As with the other forms of personal connection, these youth’s engagement increased as program activities became personally meaningful. They discovered the impact their work could have in making a difference in their communities.

Members of Faith in Motion, a faith-based dance group, attributed their increased engagement to forming a connection to the religious mission of this program. For example, Kevin said,

I used to just come here for friends, just because they were here. But then I came to understand that if I take my mind off the world . . . and you know stop thinking about just myself all the time, I can start thinking about God and that he really wants to do something in my life.

A main project for this program was preparing for a dance competition, and he said, “I just like to dance so why not do it for God.” Another youth, Tyler, described experiencing a shift from being motivated primarily by his experience of competence in dancing to being motivated by a religious purpose:

The first time I did it [dancing], I did it pretty well. But then, afterwards I’m saying, “No maybe I shouldn’t have just done that for me, maybe I should’ve done it for a more important cause.” And I was thinking about it, praying about it and stuff. And then it was just like, “Oh, I should’ve done it for God. It’s all about him; it’s not about me. It’s all about serving him.”

As Tyler continued to practice and perform in program sponsored fine-arts events, his narrative suggest that these activities took on new personal significance because he was contributing to the collective spiritual goals of the program. Religious and spiritual goals like these are found to be important to many adolescents (King & Roeser, 2009).

## Discussion

To obtain the developmental benefits of youth programs, it is important that participants be psychologically engaged in program activities. Research establishes that young people learn more when their attention is absorbed in the tasks and challenges of the learning activities (Blumenfeld et al., 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This qualitative study provides grounded theory on high-school-aged adolescents’ development of this engagement, based on narrative accounts of youth who reported salient upward changes. Our analyses suggest, first, that the core change process that youth experienced across 10 diverse programs entailed developing a personal connection to program activities and, second, that the personal connections youth described took three different forms. It is notable that these change processes were found across a sample that was ethnically diverse and included many youth from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Before discussing these processes, we must reemphasize that the qualitative methods used in this research are those for theory development (not testing). Limitations on the generalizability of

the findings should be kept in mind. We selected high-quality programs, not a representative sample. Therefore, these data cannot provide meaningful estimates of the frequencies of the processes described across different types of programs or youth. Further, our findings were based on youth’s interview accounts of motivational change, yet there may be elements of these change processes that are not available to youth’s conscious awareness. The strength of the findings, however, is that they provide preliminary theory about how adolescents experience their development of increased psychological engagement in an activity.

## The Core Process Through Which Psychological Engagement Develops

This research provides support for our speculation that forming a personal connection may be a central mechanism in the change process through which youth become motivated and engaged. Of the 44 youth who identified a significant turning point in their engagement, 38 attributed it to developing a personal connection to the program’s activities. These 38 youth—representing diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and diverse programs—attributed their heightened psychological engagement to experiencing new personal relevance and meaning in these activities. Meaning is important to engagement in both flow and interest theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

The change process entailed in forming a personal connection has similarities to the processes of identification and internalization in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to SDT, as an individual comes to internalize the goals of an activity, his or her motivation becomes more self-determined, and psychological engagement becomes stronger. In the present study, the development of a personal connection appeared to have a similar role. Youth attributed their increased engagement to changes in themselves and their perceptions of the activity that made the activity personally meaningful. Our findings differ from SDT, however, in the centrality of underlying psychological needs in driving this change process. The analyses of youth’s accounts identified only one of SDT’s three basic psychological needs, competence, as central to their experience of personal connection.

The parallels with SDT, nonetheless, help us understand the strong effects that personal connections appeared to have on youth’s behavior. According to this theory, when individuals become identified with an activity and its goals, they experience more ownership of the activity and investment in its outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This may explain why many youth in the programs we studied devoted extensive mental effort to addressing the tasks, challenges, and obstacles involved in achieving the goals of their projects. They reported devoting deep attention to metacognitive activities such as brainstorming, forecasting, and trying to think through different hypothetical scenarios in their work (Larson & Angus, in press). It may also explain why youth reported persevering through tasks in their projects that might otherwise have been boring or noxious (e.g., stuffing envelopes, going door to door, painting a brick wall in the background of a mural). The extrinsic reasons that motivated many of these youth to join the programs (for peers, parents, monetary rewards) might be expected to lead to only superficial engagement with the challenges in tasks; but research shows that people whose connection to an activity is more internalized are more likely to engage at a

deeper level and demonstrate more resilient engagement (Ryan & Connell, 1989).

### Types of Personal Connection

Given what appeared to be a common core mechanism in youth's development of engagement, it is significant that they reported forming connections to different types of goals. Our findings suggested three types of goals but do not exclude the possibility of others, especially for youth from different age groups and in different kinds of programs. Further, these data should not be seen as providing estimates of the likely frequencies of these connections across diverse youth.

The first type of connection—reported in eight of the 10 programs—was a connection to goals involving learning for the future. These youth attributed their increased engagement to discovering linkages between the knowledge and skills they were gaining in program activities to meaningful visions of a desired career or other long-term personal goals. Exploring career paths is a developmental task of this age period; yet research shows that many high-school-aged youth have little knowledge about or commitment to career pathways (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999), which can create anxiety and avoidance (Meijers, 1998). Our findings suggest that when youth do begin to connect to meaningful career paths, it can create a marked increase in their motivation and engagement.

The direct rewards of a career are in the distant future and thus are conceptualized in some motivational theories as “extrinsic” and less likely to generate deep engagement. In Eccles's (2005) expectancy-value theory, a person's long-term goals shape the “utility value” he or she attributes to an activity. They can influence the decision to participate in the activity, but that does not necessarily generate engagement. As Eccles and Wigfield (2002) explained, “A task can have positive value to a person because it facilitates important future goals, even if he or she is *not interested* [emphasis added] in the task for its own sake” (p. 120). Our findings suggest that as youth internalize the value of a program activity and build a network of connections between the activity and future goals (e.g., by learning techniques and sensibilities for being an effective teacher), the tasks and challenges of the activity can become genuinely interesting, which, in turn, may support deeper learning.

The second and least frequent type of connection was to the goal of obtaining a sense of personal competence from program activities. Youth reported becoming psychologically engaged in the process of producing artwork, developing a character in a play, or preparing for a contest because the end product of these activities provided affirmation of their capabilities. Competence experiences are recognized as a basic source of motivation and engagement, not only in SDT but in mastery learning (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) and expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Roeser, 2009).

The third type of personal connection was to a purpose that transcended the self. As in Youth Action (the program in our pilot study), youth in the social activism programs described becoming engaged by moral and civic goals (“Kids have been dying . . . I want to stop that”). Youth in the one faith-based program reported becoming engaged by religious goals. Western motivational theories have often attempted to connect all human motivation to individual psychological needs and goals (Miller, 2003); and the

first two forms of personal connection might lend themselves to this type of reductionism. But Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) argued that humans can proactively choose and be motivated by goals that are “of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). Indeed, midadolescence is an age period when some young people begin to define themselves in moral terms and in reference to grand belief systems (Erikson, 1968). Damon et al. proposed that this type of emergent identity can become a powerful motivator for pursuit of goals that—though important to the self—are not reducible to self-needs (see also Damon, 2009; Youniss, 2009). Youth in our study, whose change involved purpose, described forming personal connections between this emergent moral or religious identity and the missions of their programs to seek social change or serve religious goals. Importantly, the change they described involved not just acquiring a rational motive to continue participating; it created psychological engagement.

### Implications for Practice and Policy

The question of how to motivate and engage youth's attention in program activities is a problem frequently confronted by frontline program leaders (Larson & Walker, 2010), particularly those in urban neighborhoods (Herrera & Arbreton, 2003). First, the research suggests that youth do not have to enter programs already motivated by the program's activities. Psychological engagement can emerge from youth's experiences. Encouragement from parents, incentives, and the desire to affiliate with peers may be valuable means to get some youth in the door; but these extrinsic incentives do not preclude youth from developing deeper, more sustained engagement in program activities. This finding has special relevance to the ongoing debate on mandatory service requirements in schools (Henderson, Brown, Pancer, & Ellis-Hale, 2007; McLellan & Youniss, 2003; Stukas, Synder, & Clary, 1999). Although youth in the activism programs here joined to fill this type of requirement, they continued because they had formed a personal connection to the programs' moral and civic goals.

Second, the research suggests that what is most likely to increase youth's psychological engagement is when a program successfully connects with their earnest and serious side. For most of the midadolescent youth in this study, the connection was to weighty goals: to career pathways or to moral and social change objectives. The results suggest that motivation develops through youth's internal conversations (or conversations within the group) about, first, “Who am I (or we), and what do I (or we) want to achieve or become?” and, second, “What personal or transcendent goals are served by participation in program activities?” Engagement appears to increase when the answers to these two questions become interconnected.

If confirmed with further research, this model of motivational change indicates that programming and program leaders should engage with youth's personal values and goals, and help them explore multiple opportunities to find and develop authentic personal connections to activity choices. As we found, youth in the same program may form different types of connections. A number of leaders in our study described encouraging this kind of exploration to try to find the “hook” or “fit” for individual youth (see also Brophy, 1999). Of course, the objective is not motivation for its own sake, nor do we think that activities must be exclusively focused on having youth fulfill the goals that drive their engage-



ment (e.g., career, competence, purpose). Many of the diverse developmental benefits that youth programs afford come not from the products of their work but from the learning that occurs from the challenges and outcomes of their projects (Granger, 2008; Halpern, 2009; Larson & Angus, in press).

### Future Research

These findings provide grounded theory that needs to be evaluated and extended with further research. Studies with representative samples are needed to test how generalizable these processes of motivational change are across different types of youth and programs. Although we did not find clear individual differences (by age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or reason for joining) in the likelihood or types of personal connections youth formed in this sample, differences might well be apparent in a larger study. Researchers should also ask whether there are additional forms of personal connection beyond these three.

A key objective for future research is to test and better understand the pathways of change suggested here. Longitudinal quantitative studies are needed to test the predictive relationships between youth's reasons for joining, formation of personal connections, psychological engagement, and developmental outcomes. Personal connection and engagement should be evaluated as variables that mediate the effectiveness of programs for youth. In order to better understand the change processes for motivation and engagement (How quickly does it occur? What are the component experiences?), future researchers in longitudinal studies might include in-depth qualitative interviews, triggered when youth report significant changes in their engagement. It is also important to evaluate the moderating and mediating influence of individual-difference variables (e.g., prior experience, reason for joining, fit between youth and program, age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity), as well as factors from other motivational theories (e.g., values and expectations; Eccles & Roeser, 2009) that might influence formation of personal connections and increased psychological engagement. Research showing differences in motivational processes across cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 2003) suggests the importance of examining how distinct cultural meanings may be influential.

An interrelated second key objective is to understand the role of programs, program leaders, and peers in facilitating youth's process of psychological engagement (Eccles & Templeton, 2002). It is important to ask how different types of programs (e.g., arts, leadership, sports, clubs, and other school-based organized activities) provide affordances for different kinds of personal connections. Our data suggest, not surprisingly, that "purpose" was a more frequent source of increased engagement in the civic activism programs and in the one faith-based program. The role of program leaders was suggested in separate analysis of these data, which showed that leaders facilitated engagement by fostering a welcoming interpersonal climate, ensuring that serious activities were balanced with fun experiences, and providing youth with verbal encouragement and strategic assistance on their projects (Dawes, 2008). Future researchers could more closely examine how program leaders—as well as peers—contribute to (and sometimes undermine) processes in youth that lead to personal connection, engagement, and subsequent developmental experiences.

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## Appendix

### Questions on Motivation/Engagement in the Interview Protocol

#### Initial Interview

Think back to the first time you got started. Tell me how you got started.

What are your current reasons for participating?

Sometimes the reason someone starts an activity and the reason they continue in it are different. How have your reasons for being in the program changed since you first started?

Why are you motivated or unmotivated at this time?

#### Midpoint Interview

In general, how has your motivation changed since we started talking?

Probes: What was it about [the program] that contributed to this change? What did the adult leaders do? [If it has remained at a high level] What is causing your motivation to remain steady at this level?

So far, what are the most interesting parts of the work to you? Why?

Are there aspects of the work that you find boring or dislike? Why?

Has there been any point when you thought you might not want to continue with the program?

#### Final Interview

I would like to start off by asking you to think back to the first time we talked back in [time of initial interview]. Since then, what have been the main high points and low points for you in the program? What happened for you that made your motivation change?

How do you think your experience in this program has affected or will affect your motivation in other areas of your life?

[Ask if applicable] It appears that you have been working hard, and you seem to be enjoying the work? Am I right? Is this a new experience for you—to feel like you are having fun/enjoying the process while working hard? What made the work enjoyable?

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