

# Young Urban African American Adolescents' Experience of Discretionary Time Activities

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This cross-sectional study examined the daily discretionary time experiences of 246 (107 boys, 139 girls) fifth through eighth grade urban African American adolescents using the Experience Sampling Method. Relations between the types of activities (i.e., active structured, active unstructured, passive unstructured) engaged in during discretionary time and self-reported levels of motivated engagement, positive affect, confidence, and perceived alienation were explored. Results indicated that active structured activities occupied a small but important amount of young adolescents' discretionary time. Adolescents experienced the highest mean levels of motivated engagement and confidence, and the lowest mean levels of alienation when involved in these types of activities. Higher levels of positive affect were associated with participation in active as opposed to passive activities. Findings suggest that urban African American young adolescents experience more positive emotional states when they are involved in active, structured activities.

African American adolescents living in urban communities often experience a multitude of stressors that can challenge their psychosocial development. Researchers have begun to examine the contexts that may promote development in spite of such challenges (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Seidman & Pedersen, 2003). Accumulating evidence suggests that involvement in structured, discretionary time activities can buffer the negative effects of living in a poor, urban environment (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005; Marshall et al., 1997; Posner & Vandell, 1999). Despite these benefits, little is known about youth's emotional experiences while engaged in structured activities as compared with other discretionary time activities. These emotional experiences may be particularly relevant for urban African American adolescents who are less likely to participate in structured activities than suburban European American adolescents (Larson, Richards, Sims, & Dworkin, 2001). The purpose of this cross-sectional study is to document young, urban African American adolescents' emotional experiences within various discretionary time activities (i.e., active structured, passive structured, passive unstructured) using Experience Sampling Method (ESM). We anticipated that adolescents would report the greatest levels of motivated engagement, positive affect, and confidence while engaged in active structured activities during their discretionary time.

### DISCRETIONARY TIME ACTIVITIES

Discretionary time, or leisure, encompasses periods of the day in which youth are not involved in school, work, or self-maintenance activities, and includes after-school time, as well as evenings and weekends. The release of *A Matter of Time* by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (1992) developed the concept that productive use of discretionary time might play a role in healthy adolescent development and illustrated the large amount of time adolescents spend on unstructured activities, such as watching television and "hanging out" with friends. In contrast, only a small proportion of adolescent's discretionary time is typically spent in structured activities (Larson & Verma, 1999) despite evidence that they may serve as a context that promotes individual growth and development (e.g., Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005). Adolescents who participate in structured activities have demonstrated less negative psychological and academic outcomes. In particular, adolescents who get involved in structured discretionary time activities exhibit lower rates of early school dropout (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997); fewer criminal arrests during early adulthood (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000); better academic performance

(Eccles & Barber, 1999); and lower levels of depressed mood, alienation, and feelings of loneliness (Mahoney, Schweder, & Stattin, 2002). The benefits of involvement pertain to activities that are voluntary and structured (i.e., Mahoney et al., 2002). In contrast, involvement in unstructured activities, such as hanging out with friends, is associated with greater risk for problem behaviors (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

In addition to diminished likelihood of negative academic and psychological outcomes, participation in structured activities is associated with positive gains in personal development (e.g., Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003). Participation has been linked to higher levels of positive affect and personal satisfaction, particularly because activities involve individual choice and perceptions of personal control (Hills & Argyle, 1998). Eccles and Barber (1999) reported that adolescents who were involved in structured activities reported a sense of belonging, increased confidence in personal skills, and perceived competence. Collectively, these findings suggest that structured, organized activities provide a positive developmental experience; however, most of the current research has examined the benefits of activity involvement among suburban or working and middle class youth (Pedersen & Seidman, 2005).

## URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS AND ACTIVITIES

To date, only a handful of studies have attempted to examine how youth in urban communities spend their discretionary time, and even fewer studies have investigated whether involvement in structured activities is protective for urban, African American youth. Results from a recent longitudinal study examining the after-school experiences of elementary school-aged children from low-income, urban households, 48% of whom were African American, suggested that children from urban households spent 4% of their after-school time engaged in structured activities (Posner & Vandell, 1999). In contrast, 20% of their after-school time was spent watching television. For African American children, involvement in nonsport structured after-school activities demonstrated better emotional adjustment in fifth grade, controlling for prior adjustment. In contrast, participation in coached sports was associated with poorer adjustment in the African American sample.

Utilizing some of the same data as the present study, Larson et al. (2001) compared time use among urban African American and suburban White adolescents. Results suggest that urban youth spent two-thirds less time in structured activities as compared with their suburban counterparts. On average, urban African American youth spent <1% of their time each day

involved in structured discretionary time activities. Urban African American youth also spent more time engaged in discretionary activities consisting of idling (i.e., thinking, waiting, doing nothing, listening to music) relative to the suburban White youth. This type of unstructured time is associated with greater problem behaviors during adolescence (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnson, 1996; Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Meece, 1999), but may be particularly problematic for urban youth living in dangerous neighborhoods where crime, gangs, and drug activity are more prevalent. In another study that draws from the same sample as the current study, Richards et al. (2004) found that time spent in structured activities was associated with less exposure to violence, and fewer behavioral problems and symptoms of distress related to violence exposure among urban African American young adolescents.

Pedersen and Seidman (2005) examined associations between particular contexts of structured activity involvement (i.e., school-based, neighborhood youth group, religious youth group, and team sports) and outcomes among ethnically diverse, low-income urban adolescents, 29% of whom were African American. Participation in school-based activities, team sports, and religious youth groups was associated with better academic achievement (i.e., higher grades). School-based activities were also associated with less antisocial behavior, and team sports and religious youth group participation were also associated with greater self-esteem. Involvement in neighborhood youth groups, however, was associated with poorer academic achievement and lower self-esteem.

### EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES AND DISCRETIONARY TIME ACTIVITIES

In recent years, researchers have focused on examining adolescents' emotional experiences while engaged in daily activities. One study using a sample of African American adolescents compared the affective and developmentally supportive experiences provided in school-day versus after-school contexts (Kahne et al., 2001). Using a questionnaire, adolescents were asked to recall feelings and support they received during school-day versus after-school-based programming. Both males and females rated the after-school contexts more positively than the school-day contexts in terms of affective experiences and support. Additionally, females rated receiving higher levels of support than males in after-school contexts.

Some of the most informative work examining adolescents' daily experiences has relied on the time sampling technique, ESM. Unlike

questionnaires, ESM provides a method for exploring adolescents' experiences in the moment as they are occurring by assessing experiences that have a high base rate of occurrence, such as emotional states. In contrast, questionnaires force respondents to recall and summarize their experiences, and do not generally capture adolescent's changing daily experiences. Using ESM, researchers have concluded that certain types of daily activities provide unique opportunities for adolescents to experience flow and to develop initiative.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1993) described the flow experience as a subjective feeling experienced during an enjoyable and difficult activity. A flow state occurs when individuals are completely consumed in an activity to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself. It generally occurs when people are able to meet the challenges of their environment with appropriate skills, and accordingly experience a sense of well-being, a sense of mastery, and a heightened sense of self-esteem (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Research suggests that adolescents experience high intrinsic motivation, challenge, positive affect, and attention/concentration, closely approximating a flow state, during structured activities, such as sports, arts, and organizations (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson & Kleiber, 1993). In contrast, watching television is associated with low levels of challenge, low positive affect, and low attention/concentration among adolescents (Larson & Kleiber, 1993).

In a model related to flow, Larson (2000) described initiative as an important aspect of personal development in Western culture. Initiative involves an individual's ability to be intrinsically motivated to exert attention and effort over time toward achieving a goal. Larson (2000) suggested that Western adolescent life does not provide abundant daily opportunities for the experience and development of initiative, citing that experiences in structured leisure activities only account for a small fraction of adolescents' time. He points out that the great majority of adolescents' time is spent in two contexts, school and passive unstructured activities (e.g., watching television, interacting with friends), and neither of these situations provides the necessary combination of intrinsic motivation and concentration for the experience and development of initiative. However, participation in structured voluntary activities, such as sports, arts, music, hobbies, and organizations, comprise the small segment of adolescents' daily experiences where "the unique combination of psychological states, intrinsic motivation with concentration, suggests that adolescents are awake, alive, and open to developmental experiences in a way that is less common than in other parts of their lives" (Larson, 2000, p. 175).

Two recent studies support the premise that structured activities provide unique developmental contexts of experience for adolescents. Hansen et al.'s (2003) qualitative study reported that adolescents experienced greater opportunities to learn initiative through goal setting, problem-solving, and time management in structured activities as compared with schoolwork or hanging out with friends. Using ESM techniques, Vandell et al. (2005) examined the emotional experiences of 191 adolescents (52 percent male, 60 percent children of color, and 47 percent poor or near poor) during the after-school hours (i.e., time between school dismissal and 6:00 pm). Adolescents' responses were coded to reflect several emotional experiences including concentrated effort, intrinsic motivation, and positive or negative emotions. Most adolescents (84%) regularly attended an after-school program, and their emotional experiences were compared with the adolescents who did not participate in any after-school programming. Adolescents in after-school programs experienced significantly higher levels of intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, importance, and positive emotion as compared with other settings in their daily lives. Adolescents who participated in youth programs did not differ from nonparticipants in terms of their emotional experiences outside of the program, suggesting that these differences reflect program, rather than child effects.

### THE CURRENT STUDY

Building on the work of Vandell et al. (2005), this study relied on ESM to capture the daily life experiences of young, African American adolescents in an urban setting. The current study expands on prior work in several important ways. First, we included adolescents' experiences during all periods of discretionary time, including weekend and after-school hours. Second, unlike Vandell et al., all of the adolescents in our sample are African Americans residing in low to middle income, urban communities. Third, drawing on Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's (1984) theory and research on flow and initiative, we combined Vandell et al.'s various experiences to capture an experience similar to flow and initiative that we termed *motivated engagement*. A moment of *motivated engagement* is characterized by high levels of attention and desire to participate in an activity that is deemed important and worthwhile to the adolescent. In addition to motivated engagement, we also examined adolescents' experiences of affect, confidence, and alienation.

The primary aim of the current study was to compare young, urban, African American adolescents' experiences while involved in various

types of discretionary time activities to distinguish whether adolescents' experiences may vary as a function of activity type. Three categories of activities were created based on two dimensions—whether they were structured or unstructured (i.e., as part of an organization with formal guidelines and leadership) and whether they required the adolescent to exert effort or energy. This resulted in three activity types: *active structured* (AS), *active unstructured* (AU), and *passive unstructured* (PU). Structured activities were those that are organized and facilitated by a club, program, or organization and provide general guidelines for its participants (e.g., faith-based, sports, arts/music, and hobbies/organizations). Unstructured activities were those without formal guidelines or leadership and were not facilitated by an organization. Active unstructured activities were those requiring some element of effort or energy (e.g., nonorganized sports, independent art or music projects, and socializing). Passive unstructured activities were those requiring no effort or energy (e.g., watching television, listening to the radio, or idling). The three activity categories were also further divided into subcategories (e.g., music, sports) to further examine adolescents' experience in a variety of discretionary time activities.

It was hypothesized that: (1) during discretionary time, self-reported motivated engagement would be higher during structured discretionary time activities than in unstructured discretionary time activities. Furthermore, motivated engagement would be greater in *active* unstructured activities versus *passive* unstructured activities; and (2) time spent in active structured activities would be significantly related to higher levels of positive affect and confidence and lower levels of alienation. As part of our descriptive analyses, we evaluated how activities and experiences differed as a function of adolescents' grade in school, gender, and family income. Analyses of adolescents' experiences in various subcategories of activities (i.e., active structured sports) were exploratory; therefore, no specific hypotheses were proposed.

## METHOD

### Participants

The sample for the current study consisted of 246 (107 boys and 139 girls) fifth through eighth-grade African Americans who were recruited from eight public K-8 schools in urban areas of Chicago. These schools represented the socioeconomic range of schools in predominately African American neighborhoods in Chicago (i.e., three low SES, three working class, one working-to-middle class, and one magnet school from a working-to-middle-class

neighborhood). For five of the neighborhood schools, the composition was 100% African American. This figure was 88.1% for the magnet school, and was 98.4% and 99.8% for the other two neighborhood schools.

Participants were recruited to obtain a sample stratified by grade and gender. In each school, research assistants described the study to fifth through eighth grade students who were given permission forms to take home to their parents for review. Study participants were then selected by random stratification from those who returned signed consent forms. Consent was obtained from an average of 39% of the parents (ranging from 14% to 64% across schools). This consent rate is consistent with other research involving youth from similar demographic backgrounds (e.g., Allison et al., 1999; Cooley-Quille & Lorion, 1999). The final sample consisted of approximately equal numbers of students across fifth through eighth grade who ranged in age from 10 to 15 years ( $M = 11.95$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ).

Family income of the sample, which included child support and food stamps, ranged from \$2,500 to \$97,500 ( $Mdn = \$19,132$ ,  $SD = \$18,935$ ). The median annual family income in these schools ranged from \$12,852 to \$37,892. The majority of parents in the sample (63%) had graduated from high school and 17% had college degrees. Forty-seven percent of the adolescents lived with their mother or mother and other adult relatives, 36% lived with two parents (for 14% of the cases this included a stepparent), 3% lived with their fathers, and the remaining 14% lived with grandparents or in other arrangements.

To determine equivalence between students who participated in the study from those who did not, an anonymous survey was administered to all fifth to eighth grade students in four of the designated schools. Results indicated that participants in the study closely resembled the school populations on most dimensions. However, participants were somewhat more likely to live with two parents (31% vs. 22%) and their mothers had slightly higher ranking jobs, as indicated by Entwisle and Astone's socioeconomic index (Entwisle & Astone, 1994), than nonparticipants.

## Procedures

Using ESM (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987; Larson, 1989), each participant was assessed for a single 1-week interval during the 2 years of data collection (1994–1996). During this week, participants carried programmable alarm watches and self-report forms, and were signaled once at random within each 2-hour period between 7:30 am and 9:30 pm for this week. When signaled by the watches, they completed a self-report form indicating their immediate activity, location, companions, and subjective states. They were asked to respond to all signals they received with the



exception of times that they were sleeping. Participants were told to put the watch in another room if they went to bed before 9:30 pm or planned to sleep past 7:30 am. On the questionnaires, the modal student reported waking up at 7:00 am and going to sleep at 10:00 pm, suggesting that our signaling schedule captured all but a small portion of participants' waking time. During the 1-week period when they were signaled, the students met with research personnel at school each morning to obtain a self-report booklet for the next 24-hour period. For the weekend, students were given a booklet containing enough forms on Friday to last until Monday morning. To minimize the effect of seasonal variation on activities (see Crouter & Larson, 1998), data collection took place at different points in the year with over-sampling of schools occurring during the spring and fall. Four schools participated in the fall, one in the winter, and three in the spring. Data were not collected during the summer months due to poor participation rates and limited access to students. All students within a school were signaled at the same time each day.

The analysis of data was restricted to students who responded to at least 15 signals and to at least 50% of the signals they were eligible to receive, resulting in 8,775 reports, and a median of 36 per person for 246 students. The median response rate to the signals was 85%. Girls had a slightly higher response rate (86%) than boys (82%). Response rates were lower for fifth grade (80%) and eighth grade (82%) than for sixth grade (89%) and seventh grade (85%) students. Time of day did not affect the rate of response. Previous ESM studies demonstrated that missed reports occur for a wide variety of reasons and across activities and have not been shown to bias the results (Larson, 1989). For this investigation, data were examined at both the signal and person level (i.e., aggregating across all signals for each person).

In addition to collecting ESM data, student and parent questionnaires were administered. The students completed their questionnaires during supervised sessions at school, and the parent questionnaire was sent home to be completed by the caregiver who best knew the child. At the conclusion of the study, each student was given a \$20.00 gift certificate for his or her participation and a newsletter with the results from the study was sent to all of the participants and school personnel from the eight schools.

## Measures

*Discretionary time activities.* Activity reports were obtained from participants' responses to the open-ended question, "Just before you were signaled, what were you doing?" Staff coded responses into 139 mutually

exclusive categories with an interrater agreement of 83%. For the purposes of this study, only participants' responses during discretionary time, including weekdays and weekends, were analyzed. Relying on past ESM strategies for data reduction (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984), these 139 codes were collapsed into three mutually exclusive categories: *active structured* (AS), *active unstructured* (AU), and *passive unstructured* (PU). AS activities were further subcategorized into three mutually exclusive, exhaustive groups: sports (e.g., organized sports teams), arts/music (e.g., music, choir, and/or dance lessons), and religious-based activities (e.g., youth group, organized volunteer work). For activities that could be grouped in more than one subcategory (e.g., church choir), grouping was guided by the predominant task associated with that activity (e.g., singing). AU activities were subcategorized into four mutually exclusive and exhaustive subgroups consisting of sports (e.g., pick-up basketball game), arts/music (e.g., art project), hobbies (e.g., playing video games), and socializing (e.g., talking on the phone) were also created. PU activities were further categorized as media-related (e.g., watching television) and nonmedia-related activity (e.g., idling).

**Motivated engagement.** At each pager signal, levels of motivated engagement were obtained by participants' responses to the following three ESM questions: "How well were you paying attention?" "How much choice did you have about what you were doing?" and "How important was this activity to you?" Participants rated all three questions using a 10-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much." Higher scores indicated greater motivated engagement, and reliability was acceptable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .65$  signal level;  $\alpha = .67$  person level).

**Affect.** Participants' affect was assessed by their responses to the question, "How were you feeling?" Participants indicated on a seven-point scale how much they were feeling: "very happy to very unhappy," "very weak to very strong," "very angry to very friendly," "very wide awake to very tired," and "very cheerful to very grouchy/cranky." Responses to these questions were reverse-scored when necessary such that a higher score was indicative of higher levels of positive affect. The reliability of this scale was good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$  signal level,  $\alpha = .84$  person level).

**Confidence.** Participants indicated how confident they were feeling when they were paged. This variable was obtained using responses to five ESM questions assessing feelings of greatness, pride, sense of calm, feeling in control, and importance. Students rated the extent to which they were feeling each particular emotion using a four-point scale, consisting of the

following responses: "NO!" "no?" "yes?" and "YES!" A sixth question assessed feelings of being respected using a seven-point semantic-differential scale, ranging from 1 = *not respected* to 7 = *very respected*. The scale demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$  signal level,  $\alpha = .80$  person level).

**Alienation.** Participants indicated the extent to which they were experiencing negative emotions, *primarily in relation to social situations*. This variable was derived from participants' responses to five ESM questions about feeling lonely, disappointed, worried, ignored, and embarrassed, which were assessed on a four-point scale. Higher scores on this index were indicative of greater feelings of alienation. Reliability of this scale was good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$  signal level,  $\alpha = .85$  person level).

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Analyses

Initially, z-scores for all of the emotional experience data were calculated for standardization and interpretation purposes. The z-scores in which .00 corresponds to each person's average report and a unit of 1.00 represents each person's standard deviation were used in all subsequent analyses. Correlations between the major study variables are listed in Table 1. Percent of time spent in each type of activity was negatively correlated with percent time spent in other types of activities. There were significant correlations between all the emotional experiences. Motivated engagement,

TABLE 1  
Correlations Among Discretionary Time Activities and Emotional Experiences

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. % time AS	—					
2. % time AU	-.18**	—				
3. % time PU	-.11	-.43***	—			
4. Motivated engagement	.12	-.03	-.05	—		
5. Affect	.21**	.05	.03	.33***	—	
6. Confidence	.11	-.11	.05	.40***	.62***	—
7. Alienation	-.06	.09	.02	-.29***	-.42***	-.33***

Note. AS (Active Structured), AU (Active Unstructured), PU (Passive Unstructured).

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

confidence, and affect were positively correlated with each other and negatively associated with alienation. As reported in a previous paper (Larson et al., 2001), discretionary time accounted for over half of these urban young adolescents' waking hours. AS activities accounted for 2.67% ( $SD = 3.86\%$ ) of urban adolescents' waking hours, as compared with 23.10% ( $SD = 12.88\%$ ) for AU activities and 27.43% ( $SD = 12.53\%$ ) for PU activities. Thus, the majority of their discretionary time was spent in unstructured activities, but somewhat equally distributed across AU activities and PU activities. Fifty-five percent of the participants ( $N = 138$ ) did not engage in any AS activities.

In order to ascertain how the youth in this sample spent their discretionary time, percentages of discretionary time spent in various subcategories of AS, AU, and PU activities were calculated. When adolescents were engaged in AS activities, 38% of the time they were participating in organizations that were religious-based. Organized team sports was the second most frequent AS activity (35% of total AS time) followed by individual sports (4% of total AS time). Very few of the young adolescents reported being involved in AS activities that were music or art-based. Socializing activities were the most common AU activity. Talking in person with others was the most frequent type of AU socializing activity (37% of AU activity time) followed by playing (16% of AU time), video games (6% of AU time), and talking on the phone (5% of AU time). Media-related (i.e., watching television) activities represented the most frequent PU activity (61% of PU time) followed by nonmedia-related activities (14% of PU time).

To explore whether discretionary time activities and emotional experiences differed by adolescents' grade, gender, or family income, a series of one-way ANOVAs was calculated. Two main effects for gender were found. Specifically, girls were less involved in PU activities,  $F(1, 245) = 5.0$ ,  $p < .05$ , and reported less positive affect than boys,  $F(1, 245) = 8.28$ ,  $p < .01$ . To create a dichotomous variable for income, participants were divided into low and moderate income groups using the median (\$19,132) to divide the sample. One main effect for income was significant. Adolescents from low-income families reported more positive affect during discretionary activities as compared with adolescents from more moderate income families,  $F(1, 245) = 6.61$ ,  $p < .05$ . Affect also differed based on grade level,  $F(3, 245) = 6.66$ ,  $p < .001$ . Post hoc comparisons using least significant difference indicated that young adolescents in fifth grade reported significantly more positive affect than those in sixth ( $p < .05$ ), seventh ( $p < .001$ ), and eighth grade ( $p < .001$ ). Differences in positive affect between young adolescents in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade were not significant.

**Young Adolescents' Experience and Activity Type**

To test the hypothesis that AS activities would be associated with higher levels of motivated engagement, positive affect, and confidence as well as lower level of alienation as compared with AU and PU activities, a series of one-way ANOVAs was conducted. Post hoc comparisons using least significant difference were made to determine differences between the activity categories. Additionally, comparisons were made between the specific subcategories of each activity's category to determine if particular types of AS, AU, or PU activities were associated with different experiences. Because of the need to make multiple comparisons, we adopted a more conservative standard of significance to control for Type I error (i.e., *p*-values of less than .01).

**Motivated engagement.** Motivated engagement differed significantly based on activity type,  $F(2, 4,189) = 47.73, p < .001$ . As shown in Table 2, the mean level of motivated engagement during AS activities was significantly higher as compared with time spent in either AU or PU activities ( $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, adolescents experienced significantly higher levels of motivated engagement during AU activities as compared

TABLE 2  
Proportion of Emotional Experiences Based on Activity Categories

Discretionary Activity	<i>n</i>	Motivated Engagement <sup>a</sup>			Affect <sup>a</sup>		Confidence <sup>a</sup>		Alienation <sup>a</sup>	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Active structured	236	.38	.53	.28	.82	.30	.85	-.21	.79	
Sports	94	.35	.53	.14	.81	.18	1.03	-.17	.75	
Arts/music	33	.38	.52	.11	.90	.28	.75	-.25	.79	
Religious-based	109	.43	.44	.46	.78	.42	.69	-.24	.24	
Active unstructured	1,967	.03	.68	.19	.90	.09	.92	-.05	.94	
Sports	164	.14	.70	.32	.85	.18	.93	-.07	.94	
Arts/music	119	.08	.62	.20	.86	.13	.97	-.09	.95	
Hobbies	776	.06	.63	.19	.85	.09	.89	-.04	.90	
Socializing	908	.02	.72	.15	.95	.07	.93	-.04	.97	
Passive unstructured	2,212	-.06	.70	-.03	.96	-.04	.97	-.01	.96	
Media	1,535	.02	.61	-.01	.92	.01	.91	-.05	.88	
Nonmedia	677	-.26	.84	-.08	1.05	-.14	1.07	.09	1.11	

Note.<sup>a</sup>For all emotional experiences, data are represented by z-scores.

with PU activities ( $p < .001$ ). Levels of motivated engagement did not differ between subcategories of AS activities (see Table 2). However, significant differences in motivated engagement were detected for AU subcategories,  $F(3, 1,841) = 4.54, p < .01$ . Discretionary time spent in AU sports and AU hobbies was associated with higher motivated engagement than time spent socializing (AU). These findings suggest that being involved in an unstructured sporting activity or hobby was more likely to produce moments of motivated engagement when compared with socializing. Finally, a significant difference was detected for PU subcategories revealing that, compared with nonmedia-related activities, time spent in media-related activities was associated with higher levels of motivated engagement,  $F(1, 2,122) = 77.60, p < .001$ .

**Affect.** As shown in Figure 1, results indicated a significant difference in affect based on activity category,  $F(2, 4,411) = 35.81, p < .001$ . Post hoc comparisons revealed no significant difference between AS activities and AU activities, but AS activities were associated with higher levels of positive affect than PU activities ( $p < .001$ ). AU activities also had significantly greater levels of positive affect than PU activities ( $p < .001$ ). As shown in Table 2, there were significant differences in affect for the subcategories of AS activities,  $F(2, 232) = 4.99, p < .01$ . Level of positive affect during AS religious-based activities was significantly higher than for AS sports and AS arts/music. No significant differences in terms of positive affect were detected for the subcategories of AU activities or PU activities (see Table 2).

**Confidence.** In terms of confidence, ANOVAs revealed group differences based on activity type,  $F(2, 4,325) = 20.62, p < .001$ . Post hoc tests suggested that AS activities were associated with higher levels of confidence than both AU ( $p < .01$ ) and PU activities ( $p < .001$ ).

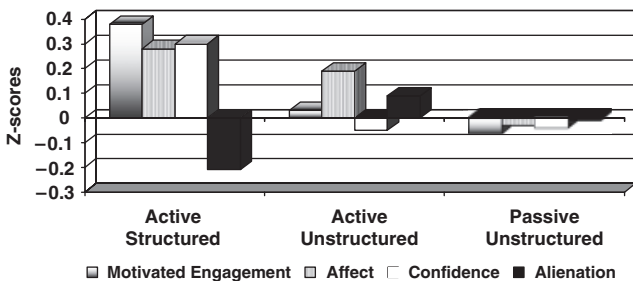


FIGURE 1 Activity type and emotional experiences.

Furthermore, AU activities were associated with higher levels of confidence than PU activities ( $p < .001$ ). As shown in Table 2, confidence did not vary among the specific subcategories of AS or AU activities. However, for PU activities, a significant difference was detected between media-related activities and nonmedia-related activities, with discretionary time engaged in media being associated with higher levels of confidence,  $F(1, 2,168) = 11.33, p < .001$ .

*Alienation.* Results from ANOVAs indicated group differences in alienation based on activity category,  $F(2, 4,329) = 5.77, p < .01$ . Post hoc analyses revealed that AS activities were associated with significantly lower levels of alienation than PU activities ( $p < .01$ ), but AS activities were not significantly different from AU activities ( $p < .05$ ). Post hoc analyses revealed no significant differences between AU and PU activities in terms of alienation. Alienation did not differ among subcategories of AS and AU activities (see Table 2). For PU activities, time in media differed significantly from time in nonmedia-related activities,  $F(1, 2,166) = 10.77, p < .001$ , with discretionary time spent in nonmedia-related activities being associated with greater feelings of alienation than media-related activities.

## DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of the present study was to investigate the differences in emotional experiences across different types of discretionary time activities in a sample of young, urban African American adolescents. Using ESM techniques, adolescents' experiences of motivated engagement, affect, confidence, and alienation were examined in relation to their involvement in three major categories of discretionary time activities (e.g., AS, AU, and PU). Results suggest that active structured activities occupied a small but important amount of young, urban African American adolescents' discretionary time, and that this time is characterized by more positive emotional experiences than other types of activity involvement.

When urban African American adolescents were involved in AS activities, they reported higher levels of motivated engagement and confidence and lower levels of alienation as compared with when they were involved in either AU or PU activities. These findings support and extend prior work suggesting that adolescents experience more positive emotional states when engaged in after-school activities or programs as compared with other contexts of their lives, such as school (Hansen et al., 2003; Kahne et al., 2001; Vandell et al., 2005). Of particular interest was the finding that adolescents' experiences did not vary significantly across the

different types of active structured activities, suggesting that experiences of motivated engagement, confidence, and alienation depended more on the level of organization and structure of the discretionary time activities rather than the particular type of activity. Similar to prior studies that have examined adolescents' adjustment as the primary outcome, the present findings support the fact that discretionary time activities are particularly beneficial to adolescents when they are voluntary and structured (Mahoney et al., 2002; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Osgood et al., 1996; Pettit et al., 1999). In addition, these findings are consistent with past research that links organized activities with more positive adjustment, including less depressed moods, better psychosocial well-being, higher levels of achievement, and perceived competence (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Hills & Argyle, 1998; Mahoney et al., 2002).

Although urban African American adolescents' emotional experiences were generally more positive while engaged in AS activities, there were no differences in positive affect when adolescents engaged in AS activities versus AU activities. Both AS and AU activities, however, were associated with higher levels of positive affect than were passive unstructured activities (PU). These findings suggest that the active, interactive quality that characterizes both AS and AU activities may be more important than the level of structure in producing feelings of positive affect. Notably though, not all AS activities were equivalent in producing feelings of positive affect for urban African American adolescents. Significantly higher levels of positive affect were reported when adolescents were involved in religious-based organizations as compared with other structured activities, such as sports or arts/music. These findings do not suggest that sports may be detrimental for African American youth as has been previously reported (see Posner & Vandell, 1999). The present findings, however, do support prior work suggesting that adolescents may experience more positive growth experiences related to participation in religious or faith-based activities as compared with other activities (Hansen et al., 2003).

Involvement in religious activities has been shown to have positive effects on adolescents' psychological adjustment, especially for inner-city, African American youth (Johnson, Jang, Li, & Larson, 2000; King & Furrow, 2004). Religious activity involvement is associated with higher self-esteem and better psychological functioning (Ball, Armistead, & Austin, 2003; Pedersen & Seidman, 2005). Other studies have reported that African American youth who participate in religious activities are less likely to deal drugs, commit nondrug crimes, and use alcohol and drugs (Johnson et al., 2000; Wallace & Forman, 1998). Future work should examine potential mechanisms that may explain why involvement in religious



activities is associated with better adjustment outcomes, particularly for African American adolescents.

When considering young, urban African American adolescents' involvement in various unstructured activities, those that were active (vs. passive) were associated with higher levels of motivated engagement, concentration, and positive affect. Interestingly, adolescents participating in active unstructured sports and hobbies reported higher levels of motivated engagement than during active unstructured socializing activities. Although adolescents experienced less motivated engagement when involved in unstructured (vs. structured) versions of same activities (e.g., pick-up basketball game vs. playing on a basketball team), findings were consistent with the notion that participation in sports or music involves greater levels of intrinsic motivation and concentration as compared with hanging out with friends (Hansen et al., 2003; Larson, 2000). Perhaps sporting activities and hobbies utilize more constructive attention and goal oriented thoughts whereas socializing, although categorized as active, does not require much effort. These findings support Larson's (2000) beliefs that in order to achieve higher levels of intrinsic motivation it is essential not only to be interested in the activity but also to exert attention and efforts directed toward creating some form of order or achieving a set goal.

In contrast to other emotional experiences, young, urban African American adolescents did not experience significantly different levels of alienation when engaged in unstructured activities, regardless of whether they were active or passive. Prior research has found that involvement in unstructured activities, such as hanging out with friends, was associated with greater risk for problem behaviors (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Osgood et al., 1996; Pettit et al., 1999). Results from this study extend prior research by examining adolescents' experiences while engaged in unstructured activities. African American adolescents experienced more feelings of loneliness, disappointment, and isolation when involved in unstructured activities. This finding is particularly problematic when considering that the adolescents in this sample spent the majority of their discretionary time engaged in PU activities including television viewing or idling.

Consistent with findings from studies with suburban populations (Larson & Kleiber, 1993), adolescents reported experiencing significantly lower levels of motivated engagement, confidence, and positive affect while engaged in PU activities, particularly television viewing, as compared with more active, structured activities. Similarly, young, urban African American adolescents reported the least positive emotional experiences during unstructured after-school time which consisted mainly of television viewing (Vandell et al., 2005). When comparing the

various PU activities (i.e., media-related versus nonmedia-related), results from this study highlight that television viewing may provide a more positive affective experience (i.e., higher levels of motivated engagement, confidence, and lower levels of alienation) for African American adolescents as opposed to doing nothing or idling.

One important issue to consider when examining the effects of activities on adolescents is the role of self-selection factors in predicting who gets involved in what type of activities. In the current study, there were very few grade, gender, or family income differences in African American adolescents' involvement or experiences within activities. Only adolescents' experience of positive affect was differentiated by demographic variables. Positive affect was significantly higher for boys, those adolescents from lower income families, and for younger adolescents. Thus, experiences of positive affect appear to be more variable and sensitive than other emotional experiences among African American adolescents.

Although prior studies have suggested mixed results in terms of gender and activity involvement (e.g., Eccles & Barber, 1999; Pedersen & Seidman, 2005), these results suggested that for young, urban African American adolescents, girls and boys engaged in AS and AU activities at similar rates. Boys, however, engaged in PU activities more frequently than girls. Despite higher levels of PU activities, boys reported higher levels of positive affect than girls. Prior research has suggested that watching television is associated with low levels of positive affect among adolescents (Larson & Kleiber, 1993); however, these findings suggest that the effects may vary by gender.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although examination of demographic factors begins to speak to the issue of self-selection factors in determining activity involvement, it cannot address the complex interplay between adolescents' characteristics and their emotional experiences while involved in particular types of activities. Associations between discretionary time activities and emotional experiences may be explained by a third variable, namely adolescents' self-worth. A recent prospective model of self-selection factors suggests that adolescents with more positive cognitions (i.e., higher levels of self-worth and more positive attributional style) were more involved in organized activities during high school (Bohnert, Martin, & Garber, 2007). Applying this model to the current findings, we would anticipate that adolescents who feel good about themselves and their abilities may get more involved in structured activities. These same adolescents with high feelings of

self-worth may be more inclined to report positive emotional experiences while engaged in these activities. Future research would benefit from being able to control for self-selection into structured activities to better understand the interplay between individual characteristics, experiences in structured activities, and outcomes associated with these activities, particularly for African American adolescents.

The present findings suggest the importance of examining emotional experiences of youth while engaged in different types of activities. One limitation of this study, however, was the low reliability for the motivated engagement scale. A possible explanation is that the selected ESM questions captured particular aspects of motivated engagement, but may not thoroughly and adequately measure the whole construct. Another possibility is that motivated engagement is multi-faceted, and is not adequately captured with a single set of items. Despite the low reliability of this particular scale, future work should examine whether emotional experiences may serve as a mediator that explains how involvement in structured activities predicts better adjustment. Fredrickson (2001) has proposed that positive emotions may be the primary means for broadening and building up psychological resources. Similarly, new perspectives in mental health suggest that better adjustment is facilitated by enhancing opportunities for positive emotions and emotional experiences, broadly defined as engaged, interested, and excited (Izard, 2002). In addition, prevention research has discovered that human characteristics such as optimism, future mindedness, hope, work ethic, and honesty can act as buffers for maladjustment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Thus, activities that promote the development of such strengths in youth should at least be one of the goals of discretionary time activities. Future empirical work should examine whether positive emotional experiences generated while involved in structured activities predict better adjustment and psychological functioning.

Consistent with prior work on time use (e.g., Larson & Verma, 1999; Posner & Vandell, 1999), only a small proportion (<3%) of adolescents' waking hours were spent in active structured activities whereas an overwhelming 27% of waking hours was spent in passive unstructured activities such as watching television, listening to music, or doing nothing. Forty-five percent of participants reported involvement in at least one structured activity, suggesting that it is not just a small subset of participants who are characterized by these findings. One of the major limitations of this study, however, is the low consent rate of participation in this study, which could affect sample representativeness. Difficulty obtaining parental consent is common in research with urban families (Allison et al., 1999; Cooley-Quille & Lorion, 1999; Luthar & Goldstein, 2004). In this

study, families with more involved adolescents may be overrepresented. Thus, it is possible that participation in structured activities would have been even lower had these adolescents consented to participate.

Several reasons may partially explain why most of the participants in this study spent much of their discretionary time at home rather than participating in structured activities. The paucity and accessibility of active structured activities and organizations that provide after-school activities in these urban neighborhoods can partially account for this finding. Despite the fact that adolescents in these neighborhoods are the most in need of challenging, organized, and safe discretionary time activities (McLoyd, 1998; Richards et al., 2004), many community-based activity programs tend to be supported by local funding, thus limiting availability in low-income and urban communities (Quinn, 1999). In addition, some of the activities that are available in these communities might not meet the needs and interests of adolescents. Activities for adolescents in low-income, urban neighborhoods tend to address social problems, such as drug and crime prevention, rather than encourage adolescents' to develop their talents and interests (Heath, 1994; Larner, Zippiroli, & Behrman, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Additionally, obstacles such as crime and street violence, as well as the necessity to care for younger siblings, may prevent today's urban youth from participating in activities (George & Chaskin, 2004). Furthermore, parents in impoverished, urban neighborhoods may also closely supervise and monitor their adolescents' time and space and restrict children to the home environment in order to protect them from negative neighborhood influences (Jarrett, 1999). Given the importance of structured activities for youth's development, future work with urban, African American adolescents should carefully examine the unique community, family, and individual factors that determine who gets involved in structured, organized activities.

Organized activities are beginning to be recognized as a unique developmental context for growth and learning (Mahoney et al., 2005). The present study suggests that involvement in structured activities during discretionary time is particularly advantageous for young adolescents. While engaged in active structured activities, adolescents exhibit more interest, are more engaged and motivated, feel happier, more excited, energetic, confident, and less alienated than when discretionary activity is unstructured or passive such as socializing, watching television, or idling. These findings highlight the importance of creating programs that address the unique needs and interests of adolescents by offering well-organized, challenging, and engaging activities that allow adolescents to play meaningful leadership roles (Larson, 2000; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998), particularly in urban African American neighborhoods.

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