Attainment Value and Developmental Experiences in Australian Youth Sport: Exploring the Role of Gender and Age

Catherine F. Drane, Bonnie L. Barber.
School of Psychology, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia

Introduction

Extensive research has documented the relationship between participation in structured extracurricular activities and positive adolescent development. A limitation of this field has been the lack of empirical research concerning the mechanisms or processes underlying this positive relationship. Researchers have begun to investigate these mechanisms and in doing so have recognized the role that activities play as a context affording adolescents a range of developmental experiences. However developmental experiences can be considered as more than just a mechanism for development, but as important in their own right, key developmental milestones which need to be achieved. Understanding and articulating how these milestones are achieved is important.

It is possible, however, that the positive benefits of activity participation are not available to all regardless of motivational intent, and choice. Perhaps the benefits are contingent on intrinsic mechanisms associated with choice and voluntary participation, such as the importance or meaning (attainment value) an individual attaches to an activity.

Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) suggest that sports are a context that offers adolescents opportunities for developmental experiences, such as developing initiative, forming an identity, and learning new skills as well as emotional competencies.

This current study had two goals. First, to investigate the association between attainment value and the developmental experiences of identity, initiative, team work and social skills, and the negative experience of stress, in sport. The second goal, designed to be exploratory, examined the role of gender and age in the relation between attainment value and the four developmental experiences.

Method

Participants
- 994 year 10 and 12 students, mean age 15.8 years.
- Drawn from 34 government and non-government high schools, from metropolitan and regional areas across Western Australia
- A 40-minute questionnaire administered via laptop computers, or in an equivalent paper and pencil format.

Measures

**Attainment Value** (Eccles, 1983)
- 7 point scale (1= not at all important to 7= very important).

**Experiences in Sport**
Based on Youth Experiences Survey - YES (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003).
4 point scale (1= Not at all; 2= A little; 3= Quite a bit; 4= Yes definitely).

**Identity Formation** (exploration, reflection)
- Identification exploration (5 items; e.g., tried doing new things, α = .59 )
- Identification reflection (2 items; e.g., this activity got me thinking about who I am, α = .69 )

**Initiative Development** (goals, effort, time management)
- Goals (3 items; e.g., I set goals for myself in this activity, α = .76)
- Effort (4 items; e.g., I put all my energy into this activity, α = .80)
- Time management (3 items; e.g., learned about setting priorities, α = .76)

**Team Work and Social Skills**
- (3 items; e.g., others in this activity counted on me, α = .82 )
- Stress
- (1 item this activity has stressed me out).

Results

**Moderated Multiple Regression**
A series of regression analyses were conducted to examine the independent and interactive effects of attainment value, gender, and year level on experiences. Interaction terms were created using a centered quantitative predictor variable and dummy coding procedures.

**Identity Exploration**
The simple effects of the regression predicting identity exploration were significant, F(3,987) = 21.76, p < .001, indicating that attainment value was significantly associated with identity exploration. The two-way and three-way interactions were not significant.

**Identity Reflection**
The simple effects of the regression predicting identity reflection were significant, F(3,988) = 73.79, p < .001, indicating that attainment value was significantly associated with identity reflection. A significant simple effect was qualified by a significant three-way interaction among attainment value, gender, and year.

To probe the three-way interaction, the simple slopes were plotted (See Figure 1). The interaction was further probed using slope difference tests set forth by Dawson and Richter (2006) and the results are shown in Table 1. The slope difference test revealed that year 12 boys significantly differed from all other groups in the strength of the link between attainment value and identity reflection. The attainment value to identity reflection relationship is strongest for year 12 boys. No other groups’ slopes differed significantly from each other.

**Initiative - Goals**
The simple effect of the regression predicting goals was significant, F(3,987) = 85.93, p < .001, indicating that attainment value was significantly associated with goals. The two-way and three-way interactions were not significant.

**Initiative - Effort**
The simple effect of the regression predicting effort was significant, F(3,988) = 126.03, p < .001, indicating that attainment value was significantly associated with effort. The two-way and three-way interactions were not significant.

**Initiative - Time management**
The simple effect of the regression predicting time management was significant, F(3,984) = 48.39, p < .001, indicating that attainment value was significantly associated with time management. The two-way and three-way interactions were not significant.

**Team Work and Social Skills**
The simple effect of the regression predicting team work and social skills was significant, F(3,988) = 36.46, p < .001, indicating that attainment value was significantly associated with team work and social skills. The two-way and three-way interactions were not significant.

**Stress**
The simple effect of the regression predicting stress was significant, F(3,983) = 6.06, p < .001, indicating that attainment value was significantly associated with stress. The two-way and three-way interactions were not significant.

**Discussion**

The present study found that adolescents with higher levels of attainment value reported more developmental experiences associated with identity formation, initiative development, team work and social skills, and stress. The attainment value and identity reflection link was significantly moderated by gender and age. Specifically, the attainment value and identity reflection link was stronger for year twelve adolescent males. The high value or importance that adolescent males attach to sport allows sport to be a context for reflection, particularly in year twelve when adolescents are transitioning out of high school. It is possible that for adolescent males identity remains quite an abstract concept until year twelve, then they are forced to transition out of high school and furthermore make life changing decisions about employment, higher education, relationships, sexuality and morality. An increased capacity for identity reflection, and ultimately identity formation, becomes necessary rather than optional.

Although the findings of the present study showed that adolescents who value their sport reported higher levels of stress, this stress may reflect part of growing up and learning to face developmental challenges rather than stress that is directly associated with sport participation.

While these findings offer insight into the relations between attainment value and developmental experiences in sport, longitudinal research is needed in order to address the issue of self-selection before any conclusions can be drawn.

It is important for researchers in this field to consider in detail under what circumstances sport offer the most benefits for adolescents, as it will not be uniform for all children. Therefore the present study contributes an individual differences approach to thinking about activities and their effect on adolescents.

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Poster Presentation

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References


