

An Ecological Approach to the Study of Youth and the Media

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Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

- n Child is nested within a set of layered contexts
- Microsystem: the contexts of everyday life (e.g., family, school, neighborhood)
 - Mesosystem: linkages between contexts of everyday life (e.g., school-family connections)
 - Exosystem: contexts outside child's direct participation (e.g., parental workplace)
 - Macrosystem: larger social institutional forces (e.g., cultural values and norms)
 - Chronosystem: place in time; directs attention to the dynamic nature of the contexts of youth development

Focus on Molar Activities

- n Molar activities are significant developmental phenomena (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)
 - Daily activities are both causes and consequences of development
 - Activities reflect choices and predilections; opportunities and constraints

Focus on Activity Settings

- n Activity settings are the forum within which “culture is instantiated” (Weisner, 1989, p. 14)
- n Characteristics of activity settings include:
 - “Personnel” present
 - “Cultural scripts,” e.g., who initiates the activity, who directs the activity, the social exchanges that characterize the activity
 - “Goal requirements” of the activity, especially, socialization goals

n From an ecological perspective, *who* participates, *how* an activity is carried out and *why* an activity is undertaken are important elements in its implications for development.

Theoretical Perspectives on Links between Daily Activities and Youth Functioning

- n Multi-disciplinary approach to studying youth development (developmental psychology, cultural anthropology, sociology, economics)
- n Range of causal processes proposed
- n Focus of activity research has been on links between activities and “outcomes”; causal processes most often inferred rather than tested

How do Daily Activities Influence Youth Development?

- n Opportunity for knowledge and skill acquisition
- n Opportunity for self expression and identity development
- n Opportunity to build social ties
- n Opportunity to develop affiliation with social institutions
- n Time is finite; daily activities reflect roads not taken

Empirical Examples

- n **The Penn State Family Relationships Project** (RO1-RO1-HD29409 and RO1-HD32336, A.C. Crouter and S.M. McHale co-principal investigators)
- n **Juntos (“Together”)** (RO1-HD39666, K.A. Updegraff, Principal Investigator)

- n 200 central Pennsylvania, European-American families (10 year study begun in 1995)
- n 200 African American families living in Philadelphia-Baltimore area (3 year study begun in 2002)
- n 245 Mexican American families in Phoenix, AZ (two year study begun in 2000)
- n Families in each study:
 - Two parent, working-middle class families
 - Include at least two children in middle childhood and adolescence

- n Home interviews with mothers, fathers and with older and younger siblings
- n Telephone interviews with parents and youth
 - 7 calls (5 weekdays, 2 weekend days)
 - Cued recall
 - High levels of inter-reporter reliability

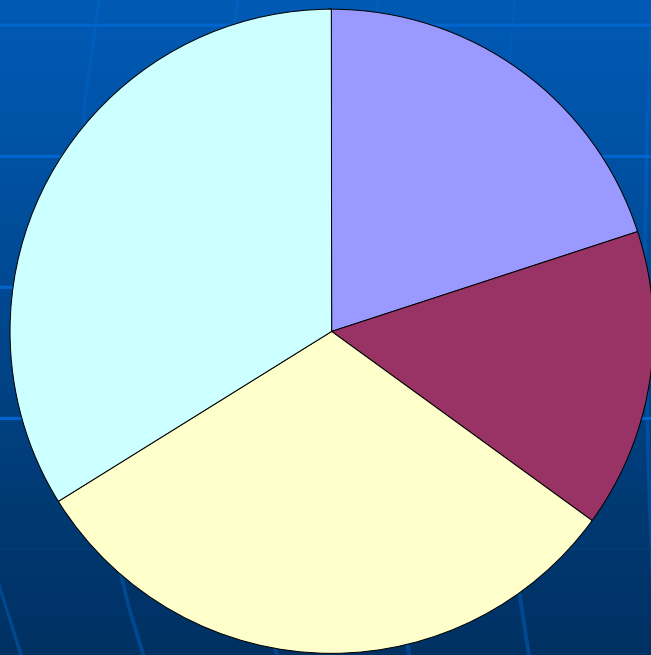
Activities provide opportunities for knowledge/skill development

- n Time spent in hobbies linked to school grades in European American families
 - E.g., more time spent playing musical instruments at age 10 predicts relative increases in math grades for boys
- n Time spent with parents linked to school grades in European American families
 - E.g., time with fathers predicts relative increases in girls' math grades and time spent with mothers predicts relative increases in girls' language arts grades from age 10 to 12

McHale, S.M., Kim, J.Y., Whiteman, S.D., & Crouter, A.C. (2004). Links between sex-typed activities in middle childhood and gender development in early adolescence. *Developmental Psychology, 40*, 868-881.

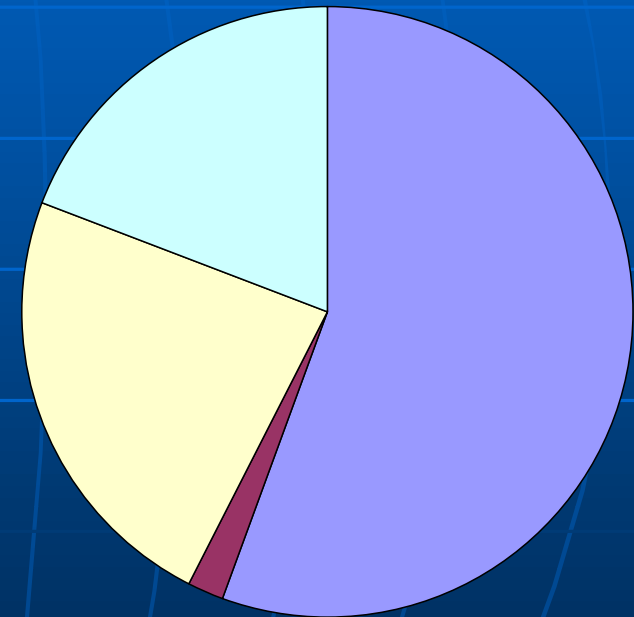
“Personnel Present” is a Defining Feature of Activity Settings

Social Contexts of Television Time in Phoenix



Legend: Alone (purple), Peer (maroon), Sibling (yellow), Parent (light blue)

Social Contexts of Television Time in Philadelphia/Baltimore



Activities Provide Opportunities to Build Social Ties

n Family Time linked to more positive marital and parent-child relationship evaluations in European-American families

- Crouter, A.C., Head, M.R., & McHale, S.M. (2004). Family time and the psychosocial adjustment of adolescent siblings and their parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 66*, 147-162.

n Parental time with the sibling dyad linked to more positive and less conflictual sibling relationships in European American families

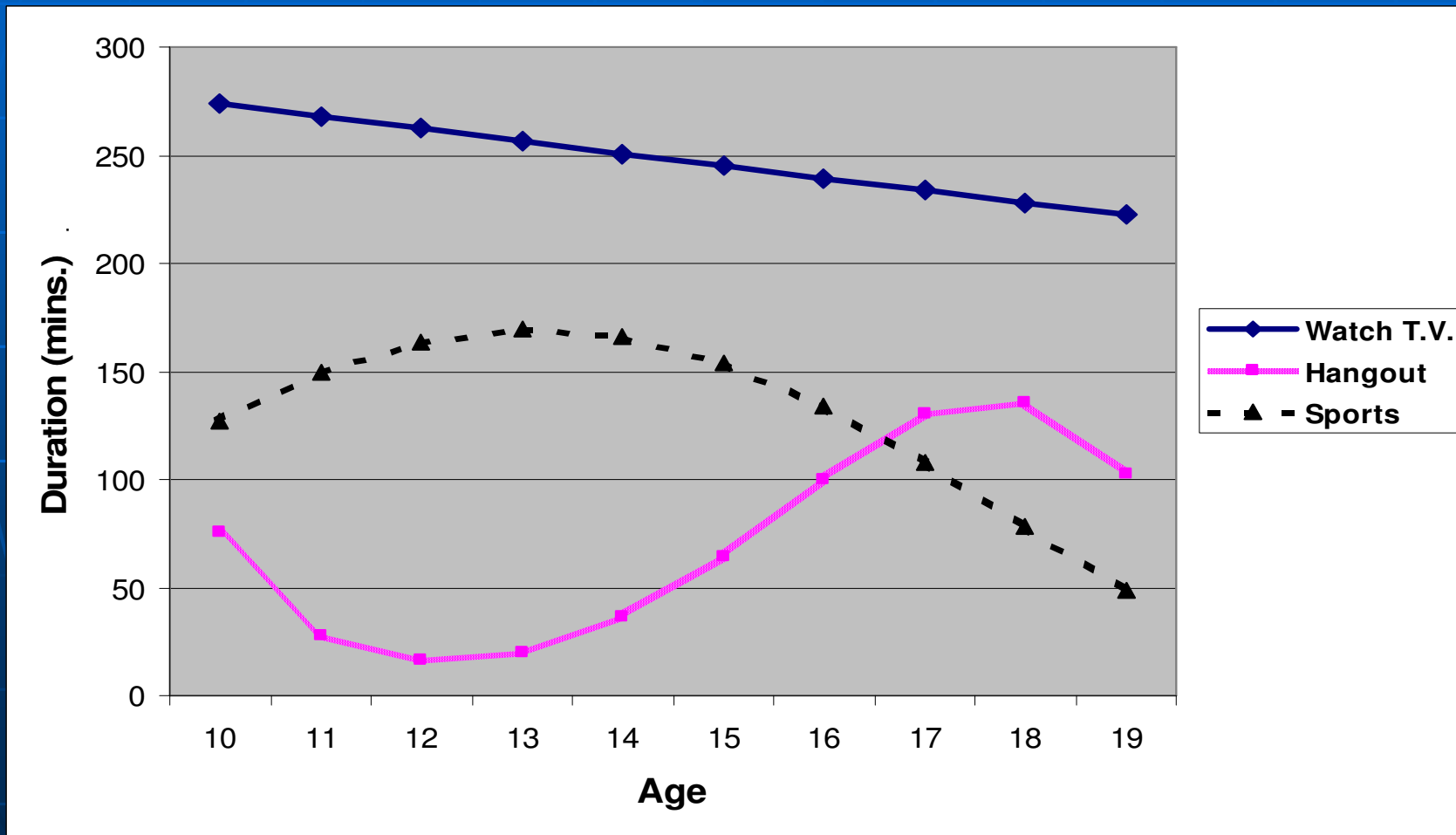
- McHale, S. M., Updegraff, K. A., Tucker, C. J., & Crouter, A. C. (2000). Step in or Stay out? Parents' roles in adolescent siblings' relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*, 746-762.

Activities Provide Opportunities to Build Affiliations with Social Institutions

- n African American youth who spent more time in sports and other school extracurricular activities reported feeling more connected to their schools (e.g., “I feel close to people at my school;” “I am happy to be at my school.”)

Dotterer, A. (2006). The ecology of children’s and adolescents’ academic adjustment, *Unpublished Dissertation*, The Pennsylvania State University.

Time Use Reflects Roads Taken and Not Chosen: Trajectories of Change in European American Youth's Activities from Age 10 (1995/1996) to Age 19 (2004/2005)



Influences on Activity Choices

- n Family resources (income, parent education)
- n Child characteristics (age, gender)
- n Limitations of extant research
 - Problem of selection effects
 - Main effects models predominate
 - “Social address” social process

Selection Effects

(Activities are both cause and consequence of development)

n Child adjustment at age 10 was a more consistent predictor of daily activities at age 12 than the other way around (European American sample).

- E.g., Conduct problems at age 10 predicted relative increases in TV time by age 12, but TV time did not predict conduct problems.

McHale, S. M, Crouter, A. C., & Tucker, C. J. (2001). Free time activities in middle childhood Links with adjustment in early adolescence. *Child Development, 72*, 1764-1778.

A Focus on Interactions

- n “. . .in ecological research, the principal effects are likely to be interactions,” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 38).
- n Person X Process X Context interactions mean that the same experiences may have different implications for youth with different characteristics, in different settings.

Process X Context Interaction

- n In less acculturated Mexican American families:
 - Sisters did more housework than brothers
 - Brothers had more privileges (e.g., going out with friends) than sisters
- n Differential treatment was linked to adjustment problems only when youth's familism values were not strong.

McHale, S.M., Updegraff, K.A., Shanahan, L., & Killoren, S.A. (2005). Culture and differential treatment in Mexican American families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 1259-1274.

Social Address (e.g., SES) Ecological Processes

- n For example, in Mexican American families, cultural orientations were linked to TV time: High familism values were linked to more TV time, and high levels of acculturation were linked to less TV time, net of family income.

(The role of Spanish-language TV in maintaining cultural ties?)

In sum, from an ecological perspective:

- n Daily activities are both causes and consequences of development;
- n *With whom, how, and why* youth engage in activities will have implications for development;
- n The social/psychological *processes* (e.g., skills, social ties) linking daily activities to youth development should be a focus of study;
- n Activities are likely to be linked to development in different ways for youth with different characteristics and in different settings;
- n Studying youth activities in context implies movement beyond social address variables to study the role of *ecological processes* in activity participation.