



# A systems theory of development through sport for traumatized and disadvantaged youth

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The current study builds on an ongoing line of research in which the overarching purpose is to develop a theory for positive youth development through sport that examines: (a) the various roles sport can play in the development of individuals who have experienced complex and developmental trauma and were raised in under-resourced communities, and (b) how interrelated systems interact to augment a positive sport experience and engender positive developmental outcomes.

**Method:** Utilizing both grounded theory methodology and narrative inquiry, interviews were conducted with 14 participants with extensive experience working with this population (e.g., high school counselor, physical education teacher, psychologist, coach, program manager, police officer), as well as knowledge or expertise in using sport with this population. Data collection and data analysis took place concurrently.

**Results and discussion:** Findings were originally presented in the form of participant systems maps, which were ultimately combined for a comprehensive systems map, representing the optimal system through which youth may engage in sport. The core variables and interactions of this optimal system are presented in this manuscript. Key findings include the role of vigorous physical activity and healthy competition in youth development, the need for talent development and youth development to be complementary goals, and the potential for multiple identity development to be a critical first step in the transference of life skills into other domains.

## 1. Introduction

Communities must have the resources to effectively support and promote the positive development of their young people, particularly for those experiencing complex and developmental trauma (Kisiel, Conradi, Fehrenbach, Torgersen, & Briggs, 2014). To that end, positive youth development (PYD), a strength-based approach to the holistic development of young people, has been one of the leading approaches. Proponents of PYD have posited the need to examine youth development while considering system influences across time (Massey, Whitley, Blom, & Gerstein, 2015). Nonetheless, many studying PYD, especially those within the sport sciences, have limited their evaluations to single programs within a limited timeframe (Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016). While it is unlikely that isolated programs will make sustainable impacts on youth facing multi-faceted challenges to development (e.g., violent community, improper nutrition, unstable home, poor school system; Massey et al., 2015), sport does provide an avenue to study the intersection of various influences, as sport often links the individual,

schools, and community.

Previous studies have indicated how sport-based PYD programs can lead to the development of moral, social, emotional, and behavioral competencies (e.g., Weiss, Bolter, & Kipp, 2016; Whitley, Massey, & Farrell, 2017), yet relatively few studies examine PYD outcomes within traditional (competitive) sport settings, where the goals include talent development and competition, as opposed to a primary goal of teaching life skills. Given that there are greater numbers of youth participating in traditional sport programs, as opposed to sport-based PYD programs (National Council of Youth Sports, 2008), there is a need to better understand how sport may (or may not) yield PYD outcomes in at-risk youth populations. This is especially pertinent when the goals include talent development and competition as opposed to a primary goal of teaching life skills.

There is a growing body of literature on PYD outcomes within traditional sport settings (e.g., Holt et al., 2017). These studies demonstrate the potential for sport to positively influence youths' lives, provided there is the cultivation of an appropriate environment,

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opportunities for physical, personal, and social skill development, and meaningful adult and peer interactions/relationships. Within sport settings, youth may garner positive experiences (e.g., sense of belonging, sense of community, friendship) and develop various competencies (e.g., respect, personal responsibility, work ethic, time management, emotional management, teamwork, confidence, leadership abilities). Youth may also accrue outcomes outside of the immediate sport setting (e.g., social capital, life skill transfer).

However, these studies often examined sport settings serving economically advantaged youth (e.g., student-athletes at a private high school studied by Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2009; largely white middle-class sample studied by Holt, Tamminen, Tink, & Black, 2009). Of particular interest in the current study is how the interaction of various dynamics may play a role in the development of youth experiencing complex and developmental trauma while growing up in under-resourced communities. As these youth often face more frequent and pervasive barriers to positive developmental outcomes than their more affluent counterparts (e.g., permanent or temporary homelessness, community violence, extreme poverty), there is a need to better understand how some youth rise above their peers in both sport and other life domains (e.g., academics), particularly against overwhelming odds.

Additionally, there has been insufficient research that examines multiple levels of influence on PYD interventions in general (e.g., individuals, families, neighborhoods, schools, community programs; Ciocanel, Power, Eriksen, & Gillings, 2017), and the specific role of sport in youth development (Massey & Whitley, 2018). Even less work has examined the intersection of sport and youth development through the lens of systems theories (see Massey et al., 2015). Given the lack of research indicated above, there is a need for a substantive theory to approach youth development through sport for individuals from under-resourced communities. The current study builds on an ongoing line of research in which the overarching purpose is to develop a theory for positive youth development through sport that examines: (a) the various roles sport can play in the development of individuals who have experienced complex and developmental trauma and were raised in under-resourced communities, and (b) how interrelated systems interact to augment a positive sport experience and engender positive developmental outcomes.

This study builds on primary data from previous research by the lead investigators (Massey & Whitley, 2016; Whitley, Massey, & Leonetti, 2016), where interviews were conducted with athletes who had experienced complex and developmental trauma and were raised in under-resourced communities (i.e., athlete participants), along with individuals identified as influential during participants' developmental years (i.e., secondary participants). The focus of the athlete participant interviews was exploring their lives and the role of sport in the midst of the socio-cultural context in which their stories unfolded, while the secondary participants examined various environmental influences that influenced the athlete participants and how these interacted to shape their development. Three narratives emerged from this research: (a) sport as a developmental asset, in which sport was a culturally accepted activity that provided a stable place where athletes could escape from their everyday lives to have fun, make connections, build social capital, and pursue dreams; (b) sport as place of celebrated deviance, where sport hindered development by celebrating violence, treating athletes as lottery tickets, and amplifying destructive environmental conditions; and (c) sport as a neutral influence amongst complex systematic factors, in which the opportunities for developmental assets accrued through sport could not overcome the pervasive environmental disadvantages. The findings from this ongoing research also highlighted the interrelated systems impacting youth development (e.g., family, faith, education, significant others) in addition to sport, along with the interaction amongst these factors. These findings drove our decision to identify participants for this current study who could make broader connections between previously identified themes and narratives from athlete

participants and secondary participants.

## 2. Methodology

This study is grounded in a non-foundational ontological stance, coupled with the belief that knowledge is socially constructed, subjective, and relative to time and place. Within this constructionist epistemology, the methodology of the current study is informed by both grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006; 2009) and narrative inquiry (Smith, 2010). Despite utilizing multiple qualitative methodologies, this research is not positioned within a framework of methodological pluralism, but rather our study purpose and ongoing data collection led to the decision to blend methodologies that could achieve coherence through an underlying epistemology (see Lal, Suto, & Unger, 2012). Specifically, the use of grounded theory allowed us to identify relationships across concepts and themes using a constant comparative analysis. Furthermore, the use of narrative inquiry allowed us to examine theory within each case, without fragmentation of the data, so that the social context of the data was inherent in the analysis. Within this, our approach remains grounded in the symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and pragmatism that shape grounded theory research (Corbin, 2009), while contextualizing the form of various narratives and the interaction between personal and social narratives (Smith, 2010).

### 2.1. Participants

Ethical approval was granted prior to the beginning of study activities. Participants were first contacted via email or telephone with a description of the project and their role as interviewees. Theoretical sampling was used to identify participants in the current study (Charmaz, 2006; Morse, 2007). In previous studies with athlete participants, we elicited life history narratives and discussed individuals who had a meaningful impact on participants' development (see Massey & Whitley, 2016; Whitley et al., 2016). Given the social actors identified in these previous studies, we used theoretical and snowball sampling techniques to identify potential participants who filled one of these social roles (e.g., teacher, coach, community leader, etc.), had extensive experience working with youth who have experienced complex and developmental trauma, worked with youth who were raised in under-resourced communities, and had knowledge or expertise in using sport with this population. Notably, we sought to find participants who could make broader connections between previously identified themes and narratives from athlete participants (see Massey & Whitley, 2016; Whitley et al., 2016), while also elaborating on constructed concepts and providing space for discrepancies and counter-information to be presented. In total, 14 participants were interviewed for this study, with a detailed description of each participant's background and experiences in Table 1.

### 2.2. Procedures

We utilized an iterative process whereby initial data collection was informed by themes and narratives developed from previous data (see Massey & Whitley, 2016; Whitley et al., 2016). Further, the data collection process in the current study was iterative in nature, whereby interviews were transcribed and analyzed in an ongoing manner, with data gathered from each interview helping to inform and shape subsequent recruitment, sampling, data collection, and data analysis processes. Interviews were conducted by the two lead investigators, in which participants were asked to share their experiences on the role of sport in the personal development of individuals who have experienced complex and developmental trauma and were raised in under-resourced communities. In doing so, we asked follow-up questions regarding: (a) the positive, negative, and value-neutral paths sport may play for youth; (b) other potential avenues of youth development beyond sport;

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