



# participation as relational process

## Unpacking Involvement in Social Action and Community Service

by Jeffrey N. Jones, Joshua H. Bench, Bethany L. Warnaar, and John T. Stroup

Educators, policymakers, and other concerned adults share an interest in promoting lifelong patterns of community service in youth. Youth community service in out-of-school time (OST) has been associated with a host of positive outcomes (see Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; National Research Council [NRC] & Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2002).

These outcomes include academic success and civic engagement (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007) and increased initiative and personal responsibility (Larson, 2000; Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009). Practitioners and researchers alike highlight the importance of youth participation in afterschool service activities. In some ways, participation is the prerequisite of community service. Without participation, no amount of engagement is possible. Authentic engagement has affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Rose-Krasnor, 2009). Lerner (2005) stated that youth development must be

considered within a larger meta-process of interpersonal relationships. Since adolescents are highly interested in peer group involvement, the presence of peers in afterschool programs promotes engagement (Denault

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& Poulin, 2009; Huebner, & Mancini, 2003; Simpkins, Eccles, & Becnel, 2008). Researchers are also examining supportive adult-youth interactions (see Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004; Hilfinger Messias, Fore, McLoughlin, & Parra-Medina, 2005). By co-planning and implementing social action projects with youth, adults can encourage the development of strategic thinking; by mentoring youth, they can support cognitive reasoning and agency (Larson & Hansen, 2005). Jones & Deutsch (2011) observed that meaningful connections with adult mentors and with peers can lead to increased participation in activities that promote prosocial development.

In addition to relationships, context is critical. Using an expanded concept of participation, researchers and afterschool youth workers can explore the reciprocal interaction of participants' values with the values privileged in cultural and programmatic systems (Barber, Stone, Hunt, & Eccles, 2005). Our understanding of participation should not presuppose that influence flows one way, from group to individual; participation involves a dynamic interchange between participants and the group. Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois (2011) suggest that participation and engagement are, in part, a function of the program environment. Youth may be motivated to participate in settings that have quality programs, activities, youth-staff relationships, and program culture.

In order to unpack the relational and context-specific aspects of youth participation, this paper focuses on youth involved in PeaceJam, an innovative service program. Consistent with contemporary thought in developmental psychology, we view behavior as being driven by needs fulfillment. Deci & Ryan (1985) identified three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, belongingness, and competence. Self-determination theory holds that environments that support these needs can foster intrinsic motivation and self-regulation (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). This social-cognitive view of motivation and behavior includes both the context of the learning community and the primacy of quality relationships (Sidorkin & Bingham, 2004). Using self-determination theory as a conceptual framework, our study explores how PeaceJam program elements meet the needs of participants and promote their authentic engagement in community service.

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## Research Methods

Our research objective was to study the effects of a social action program on positive youth outcomes. With Blumer (1969) and Denzin (1989), we assumed that relationships, program content, and experiences influence the ways in which participants make meaning of PeaceJam programming. Our study addressed the following framing questions:

- How do youth perceive the PeaceJam environment in relation to autonomy, belongingness, and competence?
- How do perceptions vary among participants?
- How do youth connect the afterschool learning context with increased participation?
- What are the perceived benefits of involvement in PeaceJam?

PeaceJam is a community-based social action program created 17 years ago to engage gang members in inner-city Denver in prosocial activities. Since that time, more than one million youth have participated worldwide. "PeaceJammers" study the lives of Nobel Peace laureates, identify a pressing community issue, and plan and implement a social action project. Local programs gather in the fall to connect and organize efforts in a regional PeaceJam Slam. They also come together in the springtime at the PeaceJam Youth Conference, where they present their projects and work on issues of social justice with a Nobel Peace laureate. In the words of the founders, PeaceJam is "[b]ringing young people together with Nobel Peace laureates to tackle the toughest issues facing our planet" (Suvanjiëff & Engle, 2008, p. 6). The PeaceJam Ambassadors program, which is geared to high school students, is the focus of the current study. (See [www.PeaceJam.org](http://www.PeaceJam.org) for an overview of programs for other age groups.)

We employed mixed methods in this study, combining results from quantitative surveys with program observations and participant interviews. This approach enabled us to study constructs of interest from several perspectives and to describe the development of participation in context—how respondents understood the origins, progression, and outcomes of program involvement.

Surveys were administered over three years at the two main organizing events in the Great Lakes PeaceJam region, which serves Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and

Ohio. Not all PeaceJammers attend the regional events, but most who attended the Great Lakes events completed the survey, with a 97 percent response rate. A few PeaceJammers completed more than one survey because they attended more than one conference.

In addition, researchers assumed the role of participant-observer in three local programs, taking detailed field notes to capture a thick description of events and social interactions. At each of two program sites, 15 adolescents, ages 14–18, were recruited for interviews through an announcement at a program meeting.

The survey sample of 781 youth was 67% female, with 43% reporting an ethnicity other than Caucasian. The sample included more juniors (33%) and seniors (32%) than freshmen (15%) and sophomores (20%). Respondents averaged 1.6 years of involvement in PeaceJam. Similarly, of the 30 interviewees, 73% were female, and 38% reported an ethnicity other than Caucasian.

To examine the multidimensional nature of engagement, we used factor analysis, a statistical procedure that examines how related survey questions “hang together” to indicate a common construct. We found three dependable factors (or latent constructs) in the survey: self-determination, academic goals and purpose, and community involvement. These factors are correlated with one another and reflect the larger construct of social engagement (Jones, Applegate, & Spybrook, 2013). This paper focuses on the first factor, examining individuals’ psychosocial experience in context of the PeaceJam learning environment. We investigated differences across subgroups of PeaceJammers on indicators of program and service involvement and of self-determination using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to see if group differences were statistically significant or simply due to chance.

### Youth Perceptions of PeaceJam Involvement

Our survey results reveal youths’ reported levels of participation in PeaceJam, highlight differences across subgroups, and help us explore perceptions of the program environment using the tenets of self-determination theory. Analysis of interview responses focuses on how PeaceJammers connected these perceptions with social action and behavioral change. The interviews also reveal participants’ perceptions of the benefits of program and service involvement.

#### *Involvement in PeaceJam*

We asked PeaceJammers to rate, on a five-point scale, both their involvement in PeaceJam and their participation in service projects through PeaceJam. The average rating for the statement “I am highly involved in Peace-

Jam” was 3.62. Statistically significant differences among subgroups include the fact that freshmen and sophomores reported higher levels of involvement than did juniors and seniors. However, respondents who had been involved in PeaceJam for three or four years scored higher on program engagement than did those with one or two years of participation. Gender was not a significant predictor of PeaceJam involvement. Ethnicity was a significant predictor for only one category with a small sample.

Similarly, the statement “I am highly involved in service through PeaceJam” had a mean rating of 3.47. The same patterns held across subgroups, except that there were no differences in terms of grade level.

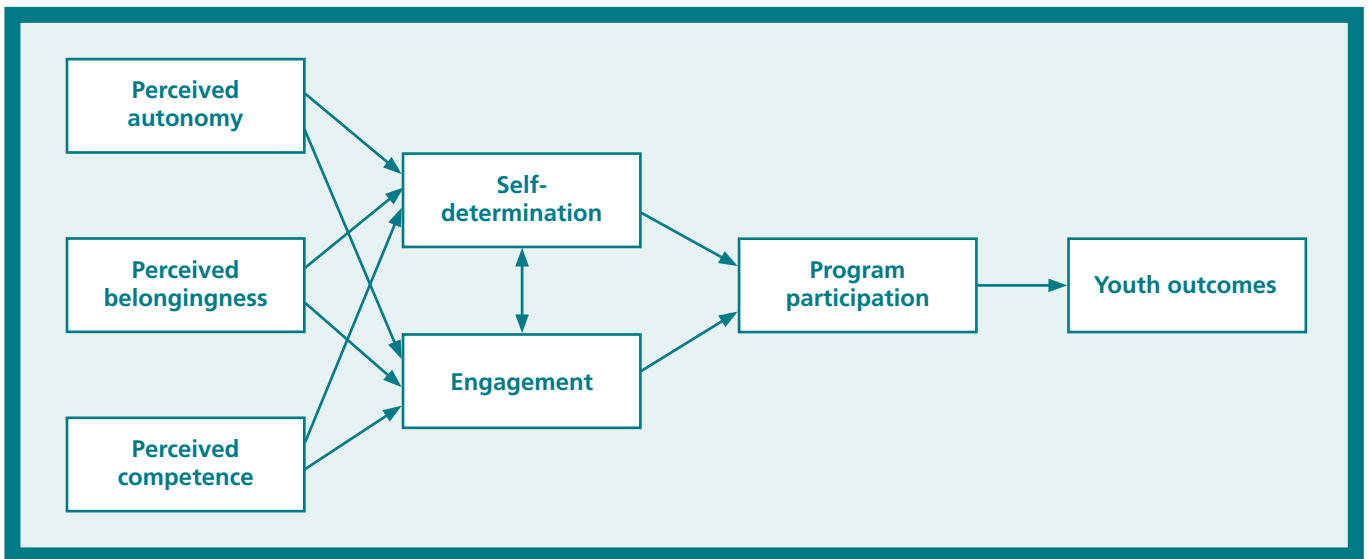
### *Perceptions of Autonomy, Belongingness, and Competence*

Self-determination theory, a leading model of social-cognitive motivation, provides a framework for considering how features of the learning environment interact with the core psychological needs of autonomy, belongingness, and competence. When these needs are met in social settings, individuals can act on a sense of determination and engage deeply in social communities and learning experiences. Figure 1 displays our concept of self-determination in the context of the current study.

On our survey, PeaceJammers reported high levels on the constructs associated with the three psychological needs of autonomy, belongingness, and competence. Using exploratory factor analysis, we found five items on the survey relating to self-determination and meaning, such as “I feel like I have a voice in the activities of my PeaceJam group,” “PeaceJam makes me feel connected to something larger,” and “Working on social action projects makes me feel successful.” The overall mean for this factor was 4.34 on a five-point scale. The variables that had the greatest effect on self-determination were youths’ level of participation in PeaceJam and in community service: Youth who reported higher levels of program and service involvement also reported higher levels of self-determination. Interview responses, organized below by the three core psychological needs, aid in understanding the survey trends.

#### **Autonomy**

A sense of autonomy is fundamental to self-determination. It is also fundamental to participation in voluntary activities like PeaceJam on the part of adolescents who have competing calls for their time and attention. Because of our interest in agency and in engaged community service, we asked PeaceJammers about their perceived choices and whether they felt they had a say in their



**Figure 1. Self-Determination, Participation, and Youth Outcomes**

group’s activities. When asked if she felt she had a voice in her group, one 16-year-old said:

Yeah, you kind of have to make your voice though. ... Like, you could sit back if you wanted to and accept that you don’t have much of a say, but if you actually want something changed and you don’t agree with it, then speak up.

Several PeaceJammers described the need to feel comfortable in the group before actively participating:

Since I’m kind of new, I’m not sure what all we do.... So I have that filling-in, like getting-roots-placed feeling. Once I get those roots, I can start sprouting out ideas and new ways to help.

These comments show the interrelation of individual decisions and the larger social context. Being part of the group suggests involvement, but participants have the flexibility to grow into active participation. PeaceJammers further noted that personal efforts contribute to larger group goals. The notion of “power in numbers” (Kirshner, 2009) is reflected in the observation of a female respondent, age 17: “I think we all have our own contributions and we all can work collectively to make it better.”

Larson (2000) studied how youth initiative can thrive in structured voluntary activity like that offered by PeaceJam. PeaceJammers regularly placed their own autonomy and agency in the context of the role of their advisor. For example, when asked if she had a voice in the group, one participant responded, “Oh yeah, I’ve come to my advisor with ideas and she feeds off of them. So yeah, I do feel like I have a voice.” Autonomy appears to be both intra-

personal, in that one must initiate it, and interpersonal, in that it is related to adult advisors and group norms.

PeaceJammers who reported the highest levels on the self-determination factor perceived that taking on roles and responsibilities in service projects helped develop their active involvement. The adoption of roles is important in building a connection to youth-serving settings (Deutsch, 2005) and can lead to a sense of responsibility (Wood et al., 2009).

### **Belongingness**

The second element of self-determination has been variously referred to as belongingness, connectedness, or relatedness. Responses to survey questions on connectedness were mostly positive but not homogenous, indicating that youth do not experience PeaceJam uniformly. Some PeaceJammers said that similar goals bind the groups together through a common purpose. One boy, 17, noted, “Everyone is working towards pretty much the same problems we are, so that’s kind of a binding force.”

Others said that connection is earned through social actions and service projects. Finn (1989) suggested that a reciprocal interaction exists between active participation and identification with an organization. When asked if he felt connected to his PeaceJam group, a 17-year-old responded:

Yeah, I’ve met a lot of people since I started joining and making more friends through it. You have a connection with them because you’re always doing the same projects and you can relate to what they’re doing.

Research has described the positive influence of peer groups in community service (Barber et al., 2005). Social identity can be a powerful motivator of behavior (Stets

& Burke, 2000; Tyler & Blader, 2001). Having friends in PeaceJam was an important part of connection for the PeaceJammers with whom we spoke. Some attributed a sense of belonging to a bond with the group, for example:

I know everybody here, and I count on seeing them once a week. I can always count on the atmosphere of the group being the same, because we have a little community here.

Belongingness is the intrapersonal experience of social and relational activity. PeaceJammers reported that this connection was formed by sharing a common purpose—a purpose that is strengthened by service, a common history, and social interaction with friends. This sense of belonging may relate to continued and increased participation.

### Competence

The feeling of success is another powerful psychosocial experience that can promote increased engagement and positive outcomes. PeaceJammers discussed the feeling of competence that stemmed from seeing the results of their individual and group efforts. When asked, “Does working with PeaceJam make you feel successful?” one young person, age 13, responded, “Yeah, just because it makes you see, like, all the trash on the grounds, and two hours later most of it’s gone—and you’re just, like, ‘Whoa, we all did this together.’” Similarly, when asked about his best experience in PeaceJam, a 17-year-old said:

The dinner at the homeless shelter, just because of how successful it was.... It was a really good feeling, knowing that you’ve done something good through cooking and giving the people that don’t always have the best meals a very good meal.

Several PeaceJammers described the experience of competence as a kind of feedback loop: The feeling of success leads to a positive experience of the program, which in turn leads to increased and continued participation. As one participant put it:

Being with PeaceJam makes me feel like I want to do more. Not just for myself, but for everyone else—academically and athletically. It makes me feel like I want to do more and succeed.

The experience of competence is further related to a host of psychosocial perceptions that include pride and enjoyment. When asked if work-

ing in PeaceJam made him feel successful, one 17-year-old said, “It gives me a sense of pride.” A 15-year-old saw two advantages of participation: “I guess the biggest part of it is you’re helping a lot of people, but it’s also really fun, so it has benefits all around.”

Autonomy, belongingness, and competence were all salient to PeaceJammers’ experiences. Participants readily identified the ways in which features of the program environment fostered these psychosocial constructs and motivated increased involvement in PeaceJam and in community service.

### Participation and Youth Outcomes

To determine how youth perceived the benefits or outcomes of involvement in PeaceJam and in community service, we asked interviewees, “What do you get that your friends who don’t do PeaceJam miss out on?” PeaceJammers said that they benefited from an expanded perspective on community and global issues, a sense of meaning and of agency attained through “actually doing something,” and a connection to something larger, beyond the self. For some, PeaceJam activity was congruent with the caring individuals they perceived themselves to be or hoped to become.

The most frequent response to the question about what PeaceJammers get that non-PeaceJam friends miss was that PeaceJammers expanded their perspective on global and community issues. More than one-third of interviewees noted this perceived outcome of program participation, for example:

I get to know more things about this community. Because before I joined PeaceJam, I didn’t know that there was a shelter for homeless people....I get to know about my community more.

People who don’t do any volunteering...don’t really have a full view of what the world is actually like and how we can make a big difference.

One-quarter of the sample shared that involvement promoted a sense of meaning, describing it variously as the satisfaction of helping others or as increased self-awareness and personal development:

I feel like I have a feeling of satisfaction that I’m helping out....I think the way that this organization is run, it’s very helpful because you’re directly related to people in your community and you have an impact right at home.

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One-fifth of interviewees noted an enhanced sense of their own agency—of “actually doing something”—as an important program outcome. In answer to the question about what she got out of PeaceJam, one 16-year-old responded:

Just the participation—the knowledge—and feeling like you’re doing something bigger than yourself and you’re actually contributing to things....Mostly teenagers basically don’t have any say, and people overlook them a lot. But in PeaceJam you’re the main people, and teenagers are, like, controlling it.

Another fifth of the sample reported that feeling connected to something larger was a main outcome of participation. PeaceJammers reported a connection to the group, but also to something larger. One teen, 17, summed it up:

It’s, like, a really strong sense of community between us, and it’s the idea of serving a community and being part of something bigger than yourself that really helps out. It’s like when people mesh together really well for a common cause.... That’s what keeps us coming back, I think.

This sense of connection, then, must be considered not only as a process that promotes social identity and increases involvement, but also as an outcome of participation. Additionally, PeaceJammers reported that involvement was congruent with their individual interests or values and that PeaceJam created the opportunity to transform these values into action. A 17-year-old shared, “My interest is helping people...and it got me to think about what I could do to help.” Another PeaceJammer reported, “We don’t have to align our interests with it, but PeaceJam naturally lines up with us.”

Lastly, several of those interviewed evoked care and responsibility as perceived outcomes of participation. A 16-year-old said: “I feel like it’s our job to care about other people....It would be terrible if someone was forced to live on the bottom rungs of life, just because no one around them cared.”

### **Positive Outcomes Through the Process of Engagement**

In this exploratory study, we were interested in PeaceJammers’ perceptions of their participation and engagement in their afterschool learning environment. Analysis of our quantitative and qualitative data explored the connections

between psychosocial experience and participants’ sustained engagement in PeaceJam and in service to the community. In speaking of the process of participation, youth reported high levels of autonomy, belongingness, and competence. They related these supportive attributes to their participation and engagement. They spoke of a reciprocal relationship between their participation and their identification with the PeaceJam community. They described opportunities for connecting interests with action and for developing new patterns of civic behavior. They also described the outcomes that resulted from high levels of program and community engagement, particularly an expanded perspective on the community and a sense of meaning and agency.

Our findings suggest that youth experience and engagement, viewed through a relational lens, may be a function of program activity, the role of the advisor, and the influence of peers. All of these factors affect participants’ meaning-making processes and, ultimately, their behavioral decisions. Consistent with the person-context paradigm (Lerner, 2005), our findings show that participation

is a complicated interaction among features of learning environments, individual needs and characteristics, and the participants’ psychosocial experience of the setting.

Early in this inquiry, it became clear that PeaceJam means a lot of different things to the diverse youth who engage in it. More research is necessary to promote understanding of developmental processes in large and complex youth

service organizations. Moving forward, we are interested in identifying and describing additional patterns of youth engagement. Participation varies among individuals in PeaceJam, but it also varies depending on the kind of program activity in which participants engage, for example, working with the local PeaceJam group, experiencing the PeaceJam curriculum, taking part in community service projects, or attending regional conferences. Indeed, many PeaceJammers described the Youth Conference as the high point of the program. However, individuals’ participation in other group activities varied because those contexts provided uneven opportunities for individual autonomy, belongingness, and competence. The relational environment in these contexts may affect how individuals participate.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

Our findings describe several possible pathways to the positive outcomes and perceived benefits of behavioral

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engagement and youth participation in afterschool service. Learning environments that provide high levels of support for autonomy, belongingness, and competence promote self-regulation and motivation to pursue intrinsically rewarding goals (Reeve et al., 2004). Larson (2000) described how settings like PeaceJam that offer voluntary but structured activity may promote the development of initiative or agency in youth participants. As many of the youth in this study expressed, the experience of making a difference is a core component of the process of participation. Furthermore, as youth provide direction and invest their identities in their collective work, they may also develop a sense of personal and collective efficacy (Kirshner, 2006). Taken together, these ideas suggest that researchers and practitioners should consider both organization-level and individual-level characteristics in assessing how informal learning environments affect the lived experience of youth. Applied research on OST engagement has focused specifically on the *outcomes* of participation. However, this study highlights the need for a greater understanding of the *processes* through which youth commit to authentic engagement. This understanding will advance the field's ability to structure programs both to support increased engagement and to promote positive results for youth.

The findings of this research also have clear implications for practice in school and community settings. They speak to the need to engage in intentional practices that are organized around, and sensitive to, the diverse needs that are present in youth-serving settings. In particular, practitioners should be prepared to structure interpersonal interactions to promote participants' identification with group goals and values, as well as their sense of autonomy and competence. Findings also draw attention to the benefits of a relational pedagogy—one that is informed by daily interactions and that provides a network of support for youth (Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Sidorkin & Bingham, 2004). To enter into such a relational pedagogy, youth workers need the support of a professional community of practice (see Fusco, 2012) and of professional learning environments that engage in relational and evidence-based practices.

Together, schools and service organizations must invest in developmentally appropriate structures and processes to maximize youth and community outcomes. Indeed, out-of-school programs have the potential to help meet the developmental needs of adolescents (Riggs & Greenberg, 2004). Researchers are considering the effects of program quality (Siaca, 2010) and of the quality of youth experience (Shernoff & Vandell, 2008) on youth involvement. These findings suggest that practitioners should focus on

aligning the core components of programs: activities, relationships, and culture (Hirsch et al., 2011).

### **Participation and Youth Development**

Authentic engagement is an ideal toward which every youth worker strives in daily interactions with youth; it is also a concern for afterschool programs as they design and implement activities. Engagement has been consistently linked with positive outcomes for youth (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003). Researchers have suggested that positive afterschool experiences may provide benefits in other domains such as peer groups and school settings (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; NRC & IOM, 2002). Programs that facilitate social action may promote the development of shared purpose through collaborative efforts towards a common goal (Kirshner, 2006). Inspired by these experiences to critically analyze their own values and goals, youth may develop a sense of purpose and self-determination (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). To move current understandings of the influence of youth-serving settings forward, "participation" must be considered as a multidimensional and contextual process that can lead to youth engagement in community service.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research was supported by a grant from the Faculty Research and Creative Activities Award from Western Michigan University. The authors would like to thank the directors, staff, volunteer mentors, club advisors, and participants of PeaceJam, and the larger PeaceJam community, for feedback and support throughout this research.

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