

## What adolescents experience in organized activities: Profiles of individual and social experiences



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### ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to identify profiles of individual (identity, initiative, emotion regulation, and teamwork and social skills) and social experiences (social integration in the activity peer group and support from the activity leader) in organized activities and examine activity-related and youth-related characteristics associated with profile membership. A total of 413 youths (57% girls;  $M_{\text{age}} = 14.44$ ) involved in 33 different activities were surveyed. Three distinct profiles emerged from the data, characterized by low, average, and high scores on both individual and social experiences, respectively. Membership in these profiles was predicted by the type of activity, the intensity of participation, and the extent to which youths experienced “flow” while participating. Overall, this study revealed that most youths reported high frequencies of positive individual and social experiences in their organized activities and that few activity-related and youth-related characteristics predicted profile membership.

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Organized activities are characterized by the presence of an adult leader, a peer group, and an emphasis on skill-building (Larson, 2000; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). From a developmental perspective, organized activities, as an additional context in youths' social ecology – together with the family, peer group, and school –, provide individual and social experiences that are likely to promote healthy adjustment. Although associations with maladjustment have been documented, such as increased rates of alcohol use among athletes (Denault, Poulin, & Pedersen, 2009; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006a), the bulk of research now suggests that participation in organized activities is associated with numerous benefits including positive educational trajectories, lower rates of risky behaviors, and lower rates of internalized problems (for a review, see Farb & Matjasko, 2012; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009). Researchers are now focusing on understanding the kind of experiences youths have in activity participation, both at the individual level (e.g., development of initiative and identity) and social level (e.g., interactions with activity peers and adult leaders). However, these experiences have mainly been examined separately and from a variable-oriented rather than a person-oriented perspective. In addition, such experiences may vary across youths and activity contexts and few studies have looked at characteristics related to the increased likelihood of gaining them (for an exception, see Hansen & Larson, 2007). In this

study, we looked at profiles of individual and social experiences and identified characteristics likely to be associated with profile membership.

### Salient individual and social experiences in organized activities

Hansen, Larson, and colleagues (Hansen & Larson, 2005; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006) identified a variety of individual experiences that take place in organized activities, including the development of identity, initiative, emotion regulation, and teamwork and social skills. Concerning identity, organized activities can offer youths the opportunity to explore their identity by experimenting with new ways of doing things and reflecting on who they are (Barber, Stone, Hunt, & Eccles, 2005; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999). By learning to find ways to achieve goals and set priorities, organized activities can also facilitate the development of initiative, or the “ability to be motivated from within and direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal” (Larson, 2000, p. 170). In addition, youths who participate in such activities, especially competitive activities, are likely to experience strong emotions and learn how to better manage these states (Fredricks et al., 2002). Youths can also develop teamwork and social skills through participation in organized activities, because, in many activities, youths have to work together to achieve a common goal. As a result, they might learn that working together requires compromise and become better at giving or receiving feedback from others.

Concerning social experiences, organized activities take place in a peer group and are supervised by adult leaders. The activity peer

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group gives youths the opportunity to make new friends and interact with peers outside their usual network (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Poulin & Denault, 2013; Schaefer, Simpkins, Vest, & Price, 2011). As underlined by Denault & Poulin (2008), being socially integrated in the activity peer group could be a key dimension of youths' social experience in organized activities. These activities also provide youths with the opportunity to connect with non-related adults and receive additional support (Denault & Poulin, 2008; Eccles et al., 2003; Mahoney, Schweder, & Stattin, 2002). For instance, youths might talk to the adult leader about their problems and develop a relationship of trust with him/her, which could lead to meaningful relationships with caring adults.

### Person-oriented profiles of individual and social experiences

Instead of looking at each individual and social experience variable separately, a person-oriented approach was chosen in this study. This provided an overall portrait of what youths experience in activity participation. For example, some youths might not learn a great deal but might nevertheless experience positive interactions with activity peers and leaders. On the contrary, some youths might learn a great deal but feel isolated from the activity peer group and not supported by the activity leaders. These all represent “naturally” occurring possibilities in the context of activity participation. Some youths might report different experiences, even though they participate in the same activity. Alternatively, some youths might report similar experiences, even though they participate in different activities. As a result, among a diverse set of activities and youths, homogeneous subgroups of youths might emerge with respect to their different individual and social experiences. Although profiles of activity participation have been investigated in prior studies (e.g., Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Feldman & Matjasko, 2007; Metzger, Crean, & Forbes-Jones, 2009; Viau & Poulin, 2014), no study to our knowledge has looked at profiles of experiences in organized activities. Moreover, as underlined by Hansen & Larson (2007), although organized activities are likely to provide growth-promoting experiences, not all participants will report the same experiences and this may depend on both activity-related and youth-related characteristics.

### Activity-level characteristics likely to be associated with the profiles

What youths experience in their organized activities is likely to be associated with the specific characteristics of the activities they are involved in. In this study, three activity-related characteristics were considered, namely activity type, intensity, and adult–youth ratio. Concerning the type of activity, Larson et al. (2006) found that participation in both sports and performance and fine arts was associated to a greater extent with experiences promoting the development of initiative, whereas participation in faith-based groups was associated to a greater extent with experiences promoting identity exploration and emotion regulation. Therefore, activity types might represent distinct learning and social contexts, with their own norms, goals, and adult and peer cultures. Intensity of participation might also be associated with youths' individual and social experiences within activities. The more time youths spend in activities, the greater their opportunities to strengthen their skills and knowledge and to engage in social interactions with activity peers and leaders (Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). Hansen & Larson (2007) found that youths who spent many hours per week in organized activities reported higher scores on individual and social experiences than youths who spent fewer hours per week in their activities. In addition, a higher adult–youth ratio has been proposed to account for increased self-reported experiences in organized activities and after-school programs (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Hansen & Larson, 2007). This is in line with findings in educational research showing that a higher teacher-to-pupil ratio is usually associated with increased learning among students,

given that teachers can devote greater attention and structure to the classroom, allowing students to be more engaged in their learning (Blatchford, Bassett, & Brown, 2011). Hansen & Larson (2007) found a positive association (but of low magnitude) between adult–youth ratio and youths' individual and social experiences.

### Youth-level characteristics likely to be associated with the profiles

Here again, what youths experience in their activity participation is likely to be associated with the characteristics of the youths themselves. In this study, we examined three characteristics, namely sex, flow, and adjustment. Sex was examined because some studies have found that participation outcomes differ between boys and girls (for a review, see Farb & Matjasko, 2012). If participation outcomes differ by sex, it might be because boys and girls have different individual and social experiences in their organized activities. For instance, participation in organized activities implies both dyadic interactions (e.g., with adult leader) and group interactions (e.g., with peers) and boys and girls may respond differently to these levels of social interaction (Denault & Poulin, 2008; Maccoby, 1990, 2000; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). The extent to which youths are psychologically engaged in the activity might also impact their amount of individual and social experiences, which is usually referred as flow (Pearce & Larson, 2006; Rose-Krasnor, 2009). The concept of flow refers to full immersion in an activity, that is, when the participant's attention is completely drawn into the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When this psychological state is experienced in an organized activity, it is particularly conducive to learning and skill development (Mahoney et al., 2009), which is why this variable was examined as a youth-related characteristic likely to be associated with profile membership rather than as an individual experience *per se*.

Finally, youths with adjustment difficulties (e.g., externalizing or internalizing problems) might benefit even more from activity participation than youths without such difficulties (Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b). One explanation could be that these youths gain more experiences from their participation. More interestingly, these experiences, especially social experiences, might not be the same depending on which types of difficulties youths face. On one hand, youths with externalizing problems may be well integrated into the activity peer group, but may want to keep a distance from the activity leader or “authority figure.” On the other hand, depressive youths might be isolated from the rest of the group but develop a strong relationship with the activity leader. To explore these ideas, we examined externalizing problems and depressive symptoms as indicators of adjustment.

### Study objectives

The first objective was to identify profiles of individual and social experiences in organized activities (i.e., development of initiative, identity, emotion regulation, team work and social skills; social integration in the activity peer group and support from the activity leader). As illustrated in the introduction, we expected the emergence of profiles characterized by greater individual coupled with fewer social experiences, or vice-versa. Given that this study is the first to our knowledge to apply a person-centered approach to the study of individual and social experiences in organized activities, this hypothesis remains preliminary. In order to gain a better understanding of what promotes or hinders high frequencies of positive individual and social experiences within organized activities, the second objective was to examine activity-related characteristics (i.e., activity type, intensity, and adult–youth ratio) and youth-related characteristics (i.e., sex, psychological engagement [flow], and adjustment) associated with membership in each profile. As reviewed above, we expected that each of these characteristics would predict youths' membership in one or the other profiles of individual and social experiences in organized activities, but especially activity

type and intensity, as well as youths' psychological engagement in the activity.

## Methods

### Participants

A total of 413 youths (57% girls; mean age = 14.44,  $SD = 1.47$ ) involved in 33 unique organized activities participated in the study. These youths came from a medium-size city in the province of Quebec, Canada. Sixty percent of these youths came from intact families, 28% from step families, 8% from single-parent families, and 4% from other types of families (e.g., adoptive families, foster care). Mothers and fathers were of North American origin in 88% of cases. The other two most prevalent origins were African (3%) and Latin American (3%). Sixty-eight percent of mothers and 80% of fathers had full-time jobs whereas 15% of mothers and 8% of fathers had part-time jobs. No information was available on family income.

Concerning organized activities, 23 were school-based (i.e., extracurricular activities) and 10 were community-based. The extracurricular activities selected for our study took place in four public high schools (e.g., football, swim team, band, student council, and cooking classes). The community-based activities selected for our study took place in community centers and sports leagues (e.g., martial arts, soccer, speed skating, dance, and scouts). Overall, for the 33 activities, the mean number of hours of participation per week was 3.51 h (range: 0.75–15 h) and the activities lasted an average of 6.82 months over the school year (range = 2 to 10). On average, the activities were led by 1.85 adults (range = 1–8; 16 activities were led by one adult [49%]; 13 by two adults [39%]; one by three adults [3%], two by four adults [6%], and one by eight adults [football; 3%]) and each activity included 17.21 youths on average (range = 5–54; seven activities included four to 11 youths [21.2%], nine activities included 12 to 14 youths [27.3%], eight activities included 15 to 17 youths [24.2%], and nine activities included 20 youths or more [27.3%]); the adult–youth ratio was 11.35 ( $SD = 6.42$ ); 18.2% of the activities were girls-only, 21.2% were boys-only, and 60.6% were mixed-sex activities. All the youths involved in the 33 activities were invited to take part in this study and 76% of them agreed to do so (range = 33% to 100%; at least 50% of youths in 28 out of 33 activities).

### Procedure and study design

In the province where the present study was conducted, organized activities take place both in the school setting and in the community (e.g., youth centers, sports centers, art centers). Consequently, activity participants were recruited in both of these contexts so as to provide a representative portrait of experiences in organized activities. Given that recruitment and data collection procedures were mostly similar for extracurricular and community-based activities, both will be described together and differences will be highlighted when relevant. For extracurricular activities, recruitment took place in four public high schools in conjunction with a larger longitudinal research project on factors related to academic achievement. For community-based activities, recruitment took place in community centers and sports leagues. We targeted specific activities to obtain a diverse set. All activities for which the adult leaders agreed to participate in the study were selected (approximately 80% of cases). For data collection, the research assistants met with the youths in each activity at the beginning or end of an activity session to explain the research and give out consent forms. Both parents and youths had to sign the consent forms in order for youths to participate in the study. The youths' self-reports on socio-demographic information and individual and social experiences in the activity were collected at the end of another activity session, at least four weeks after the activity began. Adult leaders were also asked to provide descriptive information on the activity at the same

session. Youths received a \$10 gift certificate to a movie theater for their participation.

For extracurricular activities, youths' adjustment data were collected in the larger longitudinal research project being conducted at the same schools by means of computer-based questionnaires at the start of the school year. For community-based activities, youths were asked to complete questionnaires on their adjustment at the same assessment session during which they provided socio-demographic information and reported on their developmental experiences. For extracurricular activities, the same procedure was repeated for three cohorts recruited over three consecutive years in order to obtain a sufficient number of youths involved in a sufficient number of activities. For community-based activities, the same procedure was repeated over two consecutive years.

## Measures

### Individual experiences

Individual experiences were measured using the Youth Experience Survey (YES 2.0; Hansen & Larson, 2005): (a) identity (6 items, e.g., "Started thinking more about my future because of this activity"), (b) initiative (12 items, e.g., "Learned to push myself"), (c) emotional regulation (4 items, e.g., "Learned that my emotions affect how I perform"), and (d) teamwork and social skills (10 items, e.g., "Learned to be patient with other group members"). The items were rated on a 4-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 "not at all" to 4 "yes, definitely." In their report, Hansen & Larson (2005) conducted confirmatory factor analyses on these items and the results indicated that the scales were better conceptualized as distinct dimensions – rather than one dimension – of developmental experiences in organized activities. These scales showed good internal consistency in our sample (Cronbach's alpha [ $\alpha$ ] = .73, .90, .82, and .84, respectively; see Table 1 for descriptive information).

### Social experiences

The first scale was developed by Denault & Poulin (2008) and assessed youths' social integration in the activity peer group based on five items (e.g., "Participating in this activity helped me make new friends"; "I feel appreciated by the other group members"). These items were designed to capture both the dyadic (i.e., friendship) and group levels of social integration in the activity. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very true). The Cronbach's alpha was .76. The second scale assessed support from the activity leader. The seven items were drawn from the work of Mahoney and colleagues (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Mahoney et al., 2002; e.g., "If I had a problem, I would not hesitate to talk with my activity leader"; "My activity leader pays attention to my point of view"). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very true). The Cronbach's alpha was .85 (see Table 1 for descriptive information).

### Activity-related characteristics

With respect to activity type, despite the ongoing debate regarding how best to categorize organized activities (e.g., Brown, 2013; Hansen, Skorupski, & Arrington, 2010), the activities were classified into four broad categories—for the most part categories used in prior research, i.e., team sports (38% of youths, e.g., volleyball, basketball, cheerleading), individual sports (9% of youths, e.g., martial arts, swimming, speed skating), performance and fine arts (27% of youths, e.g., band, dance, stained glass), and academic and community clubs (27% of youths, e.g., scouts, cadets, student council, cooking classes). Intensity of participation was measured by asking the activity leaders how many hours per week the activity took place. Adult–youth ratio was assessed by dividing

**Table 1**  
Correlations, means, and standard deviations for the continuous variables ( $N = 413$ ).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Profile variables											
1. Identity	–										
2. Initiative	.68***	–									
3. Emotion regulation	.50***	.61***	–								
4. Teamwork	.56***	.68***	.58***	–							
5. Social integration	.24***	.32***	.19***	.35***	–						
6. Leader support	.34***	.46***	.31***	.27***	.21***	–					
Activity-related variables											
7. Intensity	.18***	.18***	.18***	.22***	.06	–.09	–				
8. Ratio	–.01	–.06	–.02	–.02	.04	.01	–.47***	–			
Youth-related variables											
9. Flow	.42***	.46***	.33***	.35***	.19***	.29***	.03	.03	–		
10. Externalizing problems	.07	–.07	–.07	–.02	.04	–.16**	.12*	–.03	–.03	–	
11. Depression	–.03	–.07	–.05	–.13*	–.13*	–.11*	–.11*	.04	–.05	.40***	–
Mean	3.14	3.28	3.08	3.22	4.13	3.97	0.60	12.66	4.95	5.85	11.61
SD	0.62	0.58	0.84	0.59	0.81	0.81	0.25	6.95	1.17	3.55	10.31

Note. Social integration = Social integration in the activity peer group; Leader support = Support from the activity leader.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

the number of youths by the number of adult leaders. In the 33 activities, nine activities (27.3%) had a ratio of four to six youths per adult, seven activities (21.2%) had a ratio of seven to nine youths per adult, seven activities (21.2%) had a ratio of 11 to 14 youths per adult, and ten activities (30.3%) had a ratio of 15 or more youths per adult. Descriptive information for these variables is provided in Table 1.

#### Youth-related characteristics

Sex was coded 1 for “girl” ( $n = 235$ ) and 0 for “boy” ( $n = 178$ ). Psychological engagement, as represented by flow, was measured using four items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*) (e.g., “During this activity I feel so involved that nothing seems to matter”; Youth Activity Participation Survey–Western Australia [YAPS-WA]; Barber, 2008). Cronbach’s alpha was .77. Two indicators were used to assess youths’ psychosocial adjustment, namely (a) externalizing problems and (b) depressive symptoms. The Youth Self-Report was used to measure externalizing problems (YSR; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). More specifically, 32 items were used to assess delinquency (e.g., “I disobey my parents”) and aggression (e.g., “I argue a lot”). Items were rated on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*very true or often true*). This questionnaire has been validated and demonstrates good psychometric properties (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Cronbach’s alpha was .87 in our sample. As for depressive symptoms, they were assessed by The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). This questionnaire includes 20 items (e.g., “I felt sad”) assessing how often youths experienced depressive symptoms during the previous week (0 = *rarely or never* [0–1 day]; 1 = *a few times or not very often* [1–2 days]; 2 = *occasionally or somewhat often* [3–4 days]; 3 = *most of the time or all the time* [5–7 days]). This questionnaire has also been validated and demonstrates good psychometric properties (Radloff, 1977). Cronbach’s alpha was .91 in our sample. Descriptive information for youth-related characteristics is provided in Table 1.

#### Analytical strategy

In a first step, Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) for continuous indicators was used to create profiles of individual and social experiences in organized activities, based on six variables (identity, initiative, emotion regulation, teamwork and social skills, social integration in the activity peer group and leader support). The primary goal of this method is to identify homogenous subgroups of individuals who share a unique set of characteristics, i.e., similar patterns of individual and social experiences.

Given that, to our knowledge, no prior research has examined profiles of developmental experiences in organized activities, LPA was used in an exploratory way to identify the smallest number of profiles that accurately described the association between the various indicators. All analyses were conducted using Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012), which accounted for the nested nature of our data. To identify the best fitting model, the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC; Schwartz, 1978) and the sample-size adjusted BIC (ABIC; Sclove, 1987) were used in this study. Lower values on these fit statistics indicate better model fit. In addition, we used a likelihood difference test, the Vuong–Lo–Mendell–Rubin (VLMR; Lo, Mendell, & Rubin, 2001; Vuong, 1989) to assess the fit between two nested models that differed by one class or profile. In this test, significant  $p$  values indicated that the solution with one more profile provided a better fit compared to the solution with one less profile (e.g., 2 vs. 1; 3 vs. 2, etc.). The entropy measure was also used to evaluate the precision of the classification. Entropy values closer to or equal to 1 indicate better classification. No covariate was used in the classification process. Given that youths were nested in activities, we chose the robust maximum likelihood estimation to obtain unbiased standard errors for the parameter estimates. Thus, it was not possible to use the bootstrapped parametric likelihood ratio test (BLRT; Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007) to help confirm the selection of the final profile solution (this option is not available with nested data). Given the quasi-absence of missing data on the variables of interest (.0004%), missing data were handled with listwise deletion (only one case was deleted,  $n = 412$ ).

In a second step, multinomial logistic regressions were used to estimate the effect of the activity-related and youth-related characteristics on the probability of being in one or the other profile. Regressions were conducted in Mplus using the robust maximum likelihood estimation because data were nested within activities. A first set of regressions included activity-related characteristics only, a second set included youth-related characteristics only, and a third set included the activity-related and youth-related characteristics that were significant predictors of profile membership in the first two sets.

#### Results

##### Descriptive analyses

All variables used in the analyses were normally distributed, except intensity. This variable was log-transformed before conducting the analyses. The correlations, means, and standard deviations for the continuous variables appear in Table 1. As seen in this table, the correlations among the individual and social experiences variables were all significant.



Whereas the correlations among individual experiences were rather high, the correlations between individual and social experiences and the correlations among social experiences were moderate. From a variable-centered perspective, as can also be seen in Table 1, intensity of participation was positively associated with youth individual experiences, as were youths' reports of flow. Teamwork was negatively related to youths' reports of depressive symptoms. Both social integration in the activity peer group and support from the activity leader were positively associated with youths' reports of flow. In addition, whereas social integration in the activity peer group was negatively associated with youths' depressive symptoms, support from the activity leader was negatively associated with the two indicators of adjustment.

### Profile analyses

The LPA fit indices for the profiles are presented in Table 2. Based on the various fit indices, the three-profile solution was selected as the optimal fit for the data. Although the BIC and the ABIC values decreased as the number of profiles increased, the VMLR indicated that the three-profile solution was better than the solution containing one less profile and the Entropy value confirmed this solution. The three profiles are described in Table 3 and presented in Fig. 1. The average probabilities for most likely latent variable membership were high (92% for Profile 1, 96% for Profile 2, and 97% for Profile 3), indicating a high level of certainty of profile membership. Profile 1 was characterized by low ratings of both individual and social experiences ("Low ratings of experiences";  $n = 30, 7.3\%$ ). Youths in this profile reported the lowest frequencies of experiences on all variables except social integration in the activity peer group, whose frequencies did not significantly differ from those reported by the youths in Profile 2. For this group, the mean scores were at least one standard deviation – and sometimes two – below the sample mean on all variables except social integration in the activity peer group. Profile 2 was characterized by average ratings of both individual and social experiences ("Average ratings of experiences";  $n = 131, 31.8\%$ ). For this group, the mean scores were around half a standard deviation below the sample mean for all variables. Finally, Profile 3, the largest profile, was characterized by high ratings of both individual and social experiences ("High ratings of experiences";  $n = 251, 60.9\%$ ). Youths in this profile reported the highest frequencies of experiences on all variables. The mean scores were above half a standard deviation above the sample mean for most of the variables. The next step was to examine which activity-related and youth-related characteristics predicted membership in these profiles.

### Activity-related correlates of profile membership

Descriptive information on activity-related and youth-related variables by profile appears in Table 4. Results from the multinomial logistic regressions involving activity-related characteristics appear in Table 5. In the first set of analyses, the "High ratings of experiences" profile was used as the reference category. In the second set of analyses, the "Average ratings of experiences" profile was used as the reference category. In both sets, team sports were used as the reference category for the activity type. As can be seen in Table 5, several significant results emerged with respect to the activity type and intensity.

**Table 2**

Model fit indices for one-to-five profile solutions of individual and social experiences in organized activities.

	BIC	Adj. BIC	Entropy	VMLR LRT
1-profile solution	5315	5276	–	–
2-profile solution	4642	4582	.886	.0025
<b>3-profile solution</b>	<b>4462</b>	<b>4380</b>	<b>.891</b>	<b>.0454</b>
4-profile solution	4446	4341	.835	.4983
5-profile solution	4433	4306	.841	.3465

Note. Bold indicates best fit.

**Table 3**

Means for each variable used to create the profiles and significant differences between the profiles for these variables.

Variables in the profiles	Low	Average	High	$F(2, 411)$	Post hoc SNK
Identity	2.17	2.71	3.48	222.92***	1 < 2 < 3
Initiative	1.98	2.91	3.64	519.27***	1 < 2 < 3
Emotion regulation	1.51	2.67	3.50	195.21***	1 < 2 < 3
Teamwork and social skills	2.01	2.90	3.53	266.61***	1 < 2 < 3
Social integration in the activity peer group	3.66	3.78	4.38	33.64***	(1 = 2) < 3
Support from the activity leader	3.08	3.66	4.24	27.02***	1 < 2 < 3
	30	131	251	–	–

Note. Low = "Low ratings of experiences" profile, Average = "Average ratings of experiences" profile, High = "High ratings of experiences" profile, SNK = Student-Newman-Keuls.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Results first revealed that, compared to youths in the "High ratings of experiences" profile, youths in the "Low ratings of experiences" profile were more likely to be involved in individual sports, performance and fine arts, and youth clubs than in team sports. Compared to youths in the "High ratings of experiences" profile, youths in the "Average ratings of experiences" profile were more likely to be involved in youth clubs than in team sports and participated less intensively. In addition, compared to youths in the "Average ratings of experiences" profile, youths in the "Low ratings of experiences" profile were more likely to be involved in individual sports than in team sports. Taken the other way around, these results tend to suggest that team sports are associated with higher frequencies of positive experiences in organized activities than the other types of activities. Intensity of participation also tends to be associated with higher frequencies of individual and social experiences.

### Youth-related correlates of profile membership

Results for the multinomial regressions involving youth-related characteristics are presented in Table 6. In the first set of analyses, the "High ratings of experiences" profile was used as the reference category, whereas in the second set of analyses, the "Average ratings of experiences" profile was used as the reference category. Flow was the only variable that significantly predicted profile membership.

As reported in Table 6, compared to the "High ratings of experiences" profile, lower scores on flow predicted membership in the "Low ratings of experiences" and "Average ratings of experiences" profiles. Compared to the "Average ratings of experiences" profile, membership in the "Low ratings of experiences" profile was also predicted by lower scores on flow. Given that few activity-related and youth-related variables were significant predictors of profile membership, no regression including both types of variables was conducted.

## Discussion

What youths experience in organized activities, both at the individual and social level, is of great interest to researchers and practitioners seeking to gain a better understanding of why youths benefit from activity participation. In this study, we expected to find profiles characterized by high scores on individual experiences and low scores on social experiences, or vice-versa, and that these profiles would be predicted by both activity-related and youth-related characteristics, especially activity type, intensity, and youths' psychological engagement in the activity. Overall, the results revealed three distinct profiles of individual and social experiences in organized activities, characterized by low, average, and high ratings of both types of experiences. In addition, profile membership was predicted by activity type and intensity, as well as by the extent to which youths experienced flow while participating.

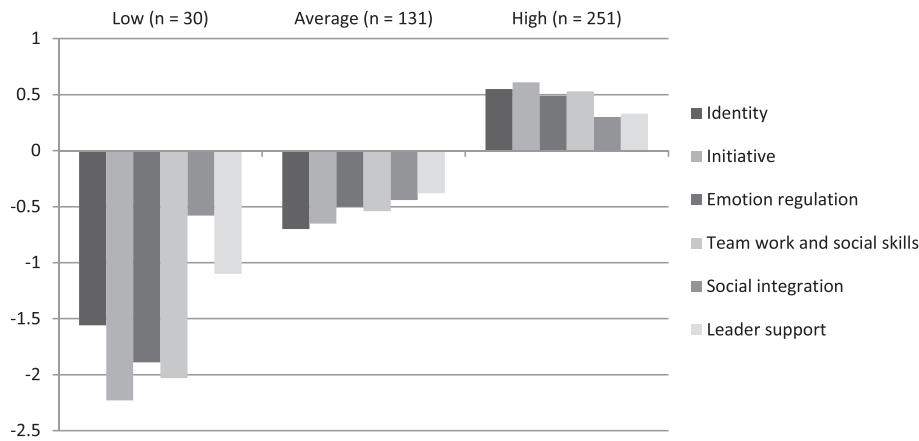


Fig. 1. Three-profile solution for individual and social experiences in organized activities (z-scores).

Profiles of individual and social experiences in organized activities

The first objective of this study was to identify profiles of individual and social experiences in organized activities. Three profiles emerged from the data and revealed that when individual experiences are high, social experiences are also high, and vice-versa. Profiles were either low, average, or high for all the variables, except social integration in the activity peer group for which there was no difference between the “Low ratings of experiences” and “Average ratings of experiences” profiles. This negated the possibility, as we expected, that some participation-related experiences might be characterized by greater individual experiences coupled with fewer social experiences, or vice-versa. The correlation matrix also suggested moderate correlations between individual and social experiences. However, overall, the results from the latent profile analyses suggest that, even among a diverse set of activities, there was not a great deal of variability in the participation experiences reported by youths.

Because, to our knowledge, no study has examined profiles of individual and social experiences in organized activities, comparisons with prior research are difficult to make. Yet, our results suggest that most youths reported high frequencies of positive individual and social experiences in the activities (60.9%). Their mean scores for the different variables used to create the profiles were approximately half a standard

deviation above the sample mean. However, a subgroup of youths who reported low frequencies of individual and social experiences also emerged from the data (7.3%). For this group, the mean scores were at least one standard deviation below the sample mean. In addition, this finding could not be attributed only to a few specific activities that turned out to be a very bad experience for these youths because the latter were scattered across 13 different extracurricular and community-based activities. The second objective of this study was thus to find out the activity-related and youth-related correlates of the three documented profiles.

Activity-related characteristics associated with membership in the profiles

With regard to activity-related characteristics, the results revealed that profile membership could be predicted by activity type and intensity of participation. As expected, differences in individual and social experiences between types of activities are consistent with prior research (Hansen et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2006). In this study, team sports (e.g., football, soccer, volleyball, basket-ball) were associated with the highest frequencies of individual and social experiences. The

Table 4 Descriptive statistics for activity-related and youth-related variables by profile of experiences.

	Low	Average	High	N total
<b>Activity-related variables</b>				
<b>1. Activity types (n)</b>				
Team sports	2	35	121	158
Individual sports	7	10	20	37
Arts	10	40	60	110
Clubs	11	46	50	107
Total	30	131	251	412
<b>2. Intensity (M)</b>				
	3.22	2.91	4.53	412
<b>3. Adult–youth ratio (M)</b>				
	12.00	13.28	12.40	412
<b>1. Sex (n)</b>				
Girls	17	77	140	234
Boys	13	54	111	178
Total	30	131	251	412
<b>2. Engagement</b>				
<b>2a. Flow (M)</b>				
	3.90	4.46	5.33	412
<b>3. Adjustment</b>				
<b>3a. Externalizing (M)</b>				
	0.77	0.66	0.67	383
<b>3b. Depression (M)</b>				
	13.21	12.67	10.80	383

Table 5 Results of the multinomial logistic regressions involving activity-related characteristics (n = 412).

	Estimate	SE	Wald	p	OR	90% CI
<b>Low ratings of experiences<sup>a</sup></b>						
Individual sports <sup>b</sup>	3.00**	0.88	3.42	.001	20.08	3.59–85.17
Arts <sup>b</sup>	1.98*	0.96	2.06	.039	7.21	1.10–47.04
Clubs <sup>b</sup>	2.36**	0.79	2.98	.003	10.60	2.24–50.24
Intensity	−0.81	0.86	−0.94	.350	0.45	0.08–2.43
Ratio	−0.03	0.07	−0.48	.638	0.96	0.84–1.11
<b>Average ratings of experiences<sup>a</sup></b>						
Individual sports <sup>b</sup>	0.52	0.68	0.78	.443	1.68	0.45–6.33
Arts <sup>b</sup>	0.32	0.28	1.16	.244	1.38	0.80–2.37
Clubs <sup>b</sup>	0.87***	0.26	3.34	.001	2.38	1.43–3.96
Intensity	−0.98*	0.47	−2.09	.037	0.37	0.15–0.94
Ratio	−0.00	0.02	−0.14	.886	0.99	0.97–1.03
<b>Low ratings of experiences<sup>c</sup></b>						
Individual sports <sup>b</sup>	2.48**	0.76	3.28	.001	11.95	2.71–52.72
Arts <sup>b</sup>	1.65	0.87	1.91	.057	5.23	0.95–28.68
Clubs <sup>b</sup>	1.49	0.81	1.85	.064	4.46	0.92–21.62
Intensity	0.17	0.88	0.20	.844	1.19	0.21–6.72
Ratio	−0.03	0.07	−0.46	.643	0.97	0.21–6.72

<sup>a</sup> The reference category = High ratings of experiences.  
<sup>b</sup> The reference category = Team sports.  
<sup>c</sup> The reference category = Average ratings of experiences.  
 \* p < .05.  
 \*\* p < .01.  
 \*\*\* p < .001.

**Table 6**  
Results of the multinomial logistic regressions involving youth-related characteristics ( $n = 383$ ).

	Estimate	SE	Wald	$p$	OR	90% CI
<i>Low ratings of experiences<sup>a</sup></i>						
Sex	−0.05	0.52	−0.09	.926	0.95	0.34–2.65
Flow	−1.22***	0.21	−5.77	.000	0.30	0.20–0.45
Externalizing	0.06	0.10	0.60	.549	1.06	0.88–1.28
Depression	0.01	0.02	0.61	.544	1.01	0.97–1.06
<i>Average ratings of experiences<sup>a</sup></i>						
Sex	0.12	0.34	0.36	.717	1.13	0.58–2.21
Flow	−0.71***	0.12	−5.71	.000	0.49	0.39–0.63
Externalizing	−0.07	0.05	−1.37	.172	0.94	0.85–1.03
Depression	0.02	0.02	1.36	.174	1.02	0.99–1.06
<i>Low ratings of experiences<sup>b</sup></i>						
Sex	−0.17	0.46	−0.38	.706	0.84	0.34–2.07
Flow	−0.51**	0.19	−2.67	.008	0.60	0.41–0.87
Externalizing	0.12	0.09	1.43	.154	1.13	0.96–1.34
Depression	−0.01	0.02	−0.48	.632	0.99	0.95–1.03

<sup>a</sup> The reference category = High ratings of experiences.

<sup>b</sup> The reference category = Average ratings of experiences.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

social climate in team sports, where the focus is mainly on working with teammates to reach a common goal, might make them a particularly suitable context for such experiences for youths (Boone & Leadbeater, 2006; Denault & Poulin, 2007; Hansen et al., 2010). Compared to team sports, individual sports (e.g., martial arts, swimming, speed skating) did not appear to be associated with high frequencies of positive individual and social experiences. Hansen et al. (2010) also found that youths who participated in individual sports scored significantly lower than youths in team sports on all experiences examined in their study (e.g., development of identity, initiative, emotion regulation, and teamwork and social skills; interpersonal relationships). However, before drawing too strong conclusions about the amount of individual and social experiences provided by team versus individual sports, these results need to be replicated because only 37 youths (9%) were involved in individual sports in our study.

Compared to team sports, performance and fine arts and youth clubs also appeared to be associated with lower frequencies of individual and social experiences. These categories might be too heterogeneous to give a clear picture of the amount of individual and social experiences they provide. For instance, for the “performance and fine arts” category, Hansen et al. (2010) found that whereas youths who participated in *music activities* scored significantly lower on identity work and initiative, youths in *performance activities* scored higher on emotion regulation, whereas youths in *art clubs* scored higher on identity work. Differences were also found with respect to the “academic clubs and organizations” category, which included student council and leadership, educational clubs, as well as cultural, social, and honorary clubs. As a result, lower-order categories should be examined in future studies in order to better identify the particular contexts in which youths report high frequencies of positive individual and social experiences.

Our results also suggested that youths in the “Average ratings of experiences” profile participated less intensively than youths in the “High ratings of experiences” profile. However, youths in the “Low ratings of experiences” profile did not differ from the other two profiles on this variable. These results are still consistent with Hansen & Larson (2007) and our expectations. Like other researchers (Busseri et al., 2006; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008), we believe that greater intensity of participation may equal greater exposure to individual and social experiences. Yet, it should be noted that the assessment of this variable was based on the activity leader’s report for the whole group. Consequently, the youths’ actual attendance in the activity may vary somewhat.

Finally, the adult–youth ratio was not a significant predictor of profile membership. These findings diverge from those reported by Hansen & Larson (2007) who found a positive association, but of low magnitude, between this activity characteristic and youths’ reports of experiences in organized activities. However, Smith, Peck, Denault, Blazevski, & Akiva (2010) found that the adult–youth ratio was not related to their staff pedagogy profiles (i.e., “Positive youth development,” “Staff-centered,” and “Low-quality”). To explain their finding, these authors highlighted the mixed evidence found in recent early education research between adult–youth ratio and the observed quality of instructional performances (e.g., Pianta et al., 2005). Whether or not the adult–youth ratio is an important factor likely to modulate what adolescents experience in organized activities thus needs to be further examined.

#### *Youth-related characteristics associated with membership in the profiles*

With respect to youth-related characteristics, the results first revealed that sex was not a significant correlate of profile membership. Our main rationale for examining sex was based on the differences between social integration in the activity peer group (favoring boys) and support from the activity leaders (favoring girls) (Denault & Poulin, 2008). However, none of the identified profiles could be distinguished based on these two variables (e.g., a profile with high social integration in the activity peer group but low adult support or vice-versa). Our results, rather, suggest that boys and girls equally report high, average, and low frequencies of individual and social experiences in their organized activities.

Profile membership was predicted by psychological engagement in the activities, as assessed by flow. These results suggest that experiencing flow while participating may be a necessary condition for reporting high frequencies of positive individual and social experiences in organized activities. Researchers have underlined psychological engagement as an important mechanism to consider when seeking to explain the benefits of activity participation (Palen & Coatsworth, 2007; Rose-Krasnor, 2009). Yet the concept of flow merits further attention in future research. It would be useful, for instance, to examine a mediation model in which psychological engagement predicts greater individual and social experiences, which in turn predicts greater positive outcomes among youths. We could also look at it the other way around; youths may report greater flow because they gain more individual and social experiences from their organized activities.

Finally, youths’ indicators of adjustment did not significantly predict profile membership. Accordingly, contrary to our expectations, youths appeared to report high, average or low individual and social experiences in their participation in organized activities regardless of their level of internalizing or externalizing problems. These results suggest that, even when participating youths show adjustment difficulties, if they participate in team sports, intensively, or if their activity provides them with the opportunity to experience flow, most of them can report high frequencies of positive individual and social experiences – and potentially, participation benefits – in their organized activities.

Overall, our results revealed that, in the 33 unique activity contexts, most youths reported high frequencies of positive individual and social experiences and that few activity-related and youth-related characteristics predicted profile membership. Accordingly, we found little diversity in the patterns of individual and social experiences in organized activities.

#### *Study limitations*

This study is not without limitations. First, it only includes a subset of growth-promoting experiences in organized activities, as well as characteristics related to the increased likelihood of gaining such experiences. Other experiences likely to account for youths’



participation benefits, such as perceived competence (Beiswenger & Grolnick, 2010), meaningfulness (Bundick, 2011), success (Blomfield & Barber, 2011) and motivation (Pearce & Larson, 2006), should thus be further investigated in future studies. Information on negative experiences in activities, such as stress and inappropriate adult behavior, was also collected in this study but the frequency of these experiences was so low that these variables could not be used in the profile analyses. Other data sources, such as direct observation during activity sessions, would provide additional valuable information. For instance, observation of staff practices (e.g., the extent to which they provide a supportive environment and opportunities for active learning and purposeful engagement; Smith et al., 2010) is likely to provide essential information on the opportunities for individual and social experiences in organized activities. Adult training and group members' characteristics might also impact youths' experiences in such activities. Second, only main effects were examined in the study. However, an examination of interaction effects would provide considerable strength for testing some person-environment fit hypotheses. For example, do less well-adjusted youths report more positive experiences in some types of activities than others? Further research is needed to explore these ideas.

Third, the fact that adult activity leaders were recruited on a voluntary basis might have increased the likelihood that primarily well-run programs with engaged and motivated adult leaders, who were secure in the adolescents' positive experiences, were included. Such a selection issue might have accounted for the very small number of participants reporting a low cluster of experiences. Selecting the activities randomly inside a school, for example, would be one way to overcome this limitation. Finally, it would be important in future research to link these profiles of individual and social experiences to youths' adjustment, which is the ultimate goal of understanding what youths experience in activity participation. It should also be noted that the data were collected over a two to three-year time frame. This time lapse could have affected the results, although we believe that no major changes occurred in the way the organized activities were provided over these years.

Nonetheless, this study adds to previous research by (a) looking at profiles of individual and social experiences, (b) using rigorous methods and criteria to identify them, and (c) examining characteristics associated with these different profiles.

## Conclusion

Better knowledge of what youths experience in activity participation is necessary to understand youth development and thriving. In this study, we found that most youths report high frequencies of both individual and social experiences in their organized activities. However, some youths, whatever their level of psychosocial adjustment, do not appear to report such individual and social experiences in their activity participation. The question is why? In this study, we partly answered this question by showing that it might depend on the activity type, intensity, and level of psychological engagement in the activity. However, many avenues remain to be explored. Future research should take a closer look, with observational data for instance, at the activity climate, staff practices, and interactions between group members and between youths and activity leaders. This more "micro" examination might provide a deeper understanding of what is going on in these activities and why youths benefit from activity participation. It may also help guide practitioners who are interested in using organized activities as an intervention strategy for youths who are at-risk for psychosocial difficulties. Indeed, this study suggests that these activities have the potential to expose the great majority of youths, even those who are at-risk, to growth-promoting experiences. From a practitioner standpoint, these results are valuable given that organized activities are already available in schools and communities are open to most youths.

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