American adults are among the busiest in the world: they spend more hours

per year in paid employment than adults in most other industrial nations

(Schor, 1991). American adolescents, by contrast, have more free time than

adolescents in most other industrial nations, with most of it spent in

unstructured activities (Larson and Verma, 1999). This disjunction can be

attributed to Americans’ philosophy of child and adolescent development.

Influenced by the European Enlightenment and nineteenth-century romanticism,

most Americans believe that children need time to be children and

that preparation for an industrious adulthood is best served when young

people have sufficient unstructured free time to play, explore, and find

themselves, both on their own and within the peer group. Adolescence is

conceived of as a moratorium period when adults should stand aside and

youth should be given freedom to try different ways of acting, experiment

with different selves, and, at the core, discover who they are and what they

enjoy (Brooks, 2001; Kleiber, 1999).

Other philosophies, however, compete with this romantic notion that

adolescents need to find themselves through free exploration. From the

early days of the American colonies, there has been a Protestant ethic that

sees idleness as wasted time and emphasizes work and structured activity

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as essential to character development. This philosophy views unstructured

and unsupervised time, especially when spent with peers, as a context in

which deviant behavior breeds (Goodale and Godbey, 1988; Wartella and

Mazzarella, 1990). A third newer philosophy combines elements of the

other two. This rational-instrumental viewpoint accepts the idea that youth

benefit from experiences of exploration, agency, and group interaction, but

it contends that the processes of personal growth are best served when this

occurs within a context of adult supervision and guidance. This newer philosophy,

which had its roots a century ago in the development of YMCAs,

YWCAs, scouts, 4H, organized sports, and other clubs for youth, has shown

increasing influence in recent decades (Brooks, 2001; Singer, 1994). This

philosophy also raises questions about whether the large amount of free

time enjoyed by American youth, most of it spent in unstructured activities,

is in their best interests.

This chapter describes how American adolescents spend their free time

and examines some implications of this time for their well-being and development.

Our examination and then evaluation of unstructured leisure interaction

with peers and organized youth activities test the rational-instrumental

idea that structured leisure may provide more favorable conditions for growth.

American society is comparatively new and open to change. It has often

been described as an experimental society, and the large amount of free time

given to youth is indicative of this. We thus examine the implications of the

“American experiment” for young people’s growth and development.

An Overview of American Adolescents’ Time Use

American teens’ large amount of free time is evident across multiple time

budget studies. There has been no recent nationwide assessment, but data

from many studies of subpopulations provide fairly consistent estimates of

adolescents’ time use. Table 4.1 summarizes time-use data for American

adolescents, as compared to adolescents in industrialized nations in Europe

and East Asia. Aggregating across studies, reliable estimates could be made

for time spent in work activities, total free time, and time within the three

most frequent free-time activities.

Strikingly, free time accounts for nearly half of U.S. adolescents’ waking

hours. We define free time as time spent in discretionary leisure activities

(excluding work and excluding maintenance activities such as sleeping, eating,

and personal care). Free time accounts for an average of 40 to 50 percent

of both boys’ and girls’ time during the school year. This estimate, of course,

represents a mean across many youth. There are categories of adolescents,

such as those attempting to gain admission into prestigious universities, who

may spend more time doing schoolwork, just as there are other groups for

whom free time exceeds 40 to 50 percent. Older adolescents tend to have

somewhat less free time than younger teens because they are often employed.

This large volume of leisure time, we have suggested, is related to the

dominant romantic American attitudes toward adolescent development.

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The influence of competing philosophies can be seen in their other activities.

American adolescents spend as much time doing household chores as

Europeans and more than East Asians. They also spend more time working

at a job than youth in these other nations do (Steinberg, 1999); 40 to

60 percent of U.S. high school students have a part-time job (Desmarais

and Curtis, 1999). Their investment of time in these activities, we think,

reflects an influence of the Protestant ethic’s view that labor is character

building, as well as the value that Americans place on employment as a

means of independence. But both of these quantities of time are quite small

(and young people’s household labor has been steadily declining;

Goldscheider and Waite, 1991). What most distinguishes American adolescents

is time doing schoolwork, which is markedly less than that of

adolescents in Europe and much less than in East Asia. Compared particularly

to Asian Confucian societies, this reflects a lower cultural emphasis

on erudition and a greater emphasis on giving youth freedom.

From Americans’ point of view, however, the important question is

not how much free time teens have but how they use this time. Is it used

in ways that serve development—or that undermine it? To address this

question, we focus on two activity categories that distinguish American

adolescents: unstructured peer interaction and structured, adult-organized

youth activities. Before doing this, however, we should acknowledge that

these two categories do not include all free time. American adolescents

spend a large amount of time watching television, an average of 1.5 to 2.5

hours per day. But this quantity is quite similar to averages for youth in

other industrial nations, so we do not give it attention here. In addition,

American adolescents spend substantial amounts of time listening to music

and playing games (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984; Larson and

Richards, 1989); also, computer and Internet use is increasing rapidly

(Subrahmanyam, Kraut, Greenfield, and Gross, 2001). Estimates for these

Table 4.1. Estimated Time Use by Adolescents

*United States Europe East Asia*

*Work Time*

Household labor 20–40 minutes 20–40 minutes 10–20 minutes

Paid labor 40–60 minutes 10–20 minutes 0–10 minutes

Schoolwork 3.0–4.5 hours 4.0–5.5 hours 5.5–7.5 hours

Total work time 4.0–6.0 hours 4.5–6.5 hours 6.0–8.0 hours

*Free Time*

Television viewing 1.5–2.5 hours 1.5–2.5 hours 1.5–2.5 hours

Social interaction 2.0–3.0 hours insufficient data 45–60 minutes

Organized youth activities 40–80 minutes 30–100 minutes 0–30 minutes

Total free time 6.5–8.0 hours 5.5–7.5 hours 4.0–5.5 hours

*Note:* Estimates are averaged across a seven-day week during periods when school is in session.

Time spent in maintenance activities such as eating, personal care, and sleeping is not included.

*Source:* Larson & Verma, 1999. Copyright 1999 by the American Psychological Association.

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categories were not consistent enough across time-use studies to include

them in Table 4.1, but the quantities for these activities are generally

smaller than the three leisure activities listed. It is also important to note

that although we focus on peer activities, American adolescents spend a

substantial fraction of their free time alone (often in their bedrooms),

which may serve as another context for personal exploration and finding

oneself (Larson, 1990, 1997).

Social Interactions with Peers, with Special Attention

to Partying

American adolescents are distinguished, especially from East Asian adolescents,

in the large amount of time they spend hanging out and socializing

with friends: two to three hours per day (see Table 4.1). If you ask them,

American teens are likely to say that they interact with friends because it is

fun, but this activity is also a context for the important American developmental

task of self-discovery and self-validation. Peers are viewed in this

democratic society as a proving ground for competence in egalitarian relationships

(Youniss, 1980). They provide a microcosm for adolescents to

develop interpersonal skills, dispositions, and ways of being that are highly

valued. Historical data indicate that this has been a substantial segment of

adolescents’ activities, for both boys and girls, at least since the beginning

of the twentieth century (Wartella and Mazzarella, 1990).

Although camaraderie with peers is embraced by Americans, there is

also distrust of the adolescent peer group. Wartella and Mazzarella (1990)

report that the youth culture that grew out of this free time in the 1930s and

1940s created a “moral panic” among adults. This adult concern has been

renewed in successive generations of parents, following the advent of rock

and roll, heavy metal, and hip-hop youth cultures. Peers are blamed for

encouraging all the sins of youth, from drug use to violence to risky sexual

behavior. The romantic American philosophy that supports youth finding

themselves through peer interactions is in conflict with the worldview of the

Protestant ethic that is suspicious of idleness and negative peer influence.

The tension between these two philosophies is brought into focus

when we look at the subcategory of American peer interaction called partying:

the gathering of friends, usually on Friday or Saturday night, away

from direct adult supervision, during which there is a contagious atmosphere

of positive emotion (Caldwell and Darling, 1999; Larson and

Richards, 1998). Lefkowitz (1998) describes parties in homes of adolescents

where music, alcohol, and a mixed gender group were some of the essential

ingredients. For these youth, the gathering was ideal when the parents of

the host teen were away; when parents were home, it was desirable that the

party was located in a part of the house that provided partial or complete

privacy from parents, such as a basement or recreation room. The activity

of partying is not confined to private homes; it may occur in a park, at a

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dance, or in other public settings where the basic components are present.

Larson and Richards (1998) describe a closely related activity, cruising, in

which a group of adolescents drives around in a car for amusement and fun.

Although a majority of American adolescents go to parties, it is not true

of all. Partying is much more common among older adolescents, partly

because of their greater freedom from parental supervision and access to

automobiles. Feldman and Quatman (1988) reported that fourteen is the

average age at which European and American parents permit teens to go to

mixed-gender parties. In a longitudinal time-sampling study, Larson and

Richards (1998) found that time spent away from home with friends on

weekend evenings increased substantially at ninth grade, with the transition

into high school. Even in the high school years, Caldwell and Darling

(1999) found that 30 percent of youth from a large sample of eight thousand

California and Wisconsin adolescents reported no involvement in partying.

But that leaves 70 percent who do, and Osgood and others (1996)

report one subcategory of youth in their study (eighteen-year-old boys with

low grade point averages and highly educated parents) who reported attending

an average of forty parties per year and spending 170 evenings “out for

fun” per year.

What is important about U.S. adolescents’ partying is the emotional

experience it elicits and the behaviors that accompany these emotions.

Partying has been referred to as the “ultimate context” for teens (Caldwell

and Darling, 1999, p. 60); it is something they look forward to all week and

an activity when they often report their most positive emotional states.

Larson and Richards (1998) found that adolescents’ emotions have a weekly

cycle, with partying on the weekend at the apex. These positive emotions

appear to provide an emotional antidote to the tedium and drudgery of

school during the week. The expectation that Friday and Saturday nights

be spent in this way is strong enough that adolescents who are alone on

weekend evenings report significantly less positive emotions than when they

are alone at other times (Larson and Richards, 1998). Larson (1983) found

that adolescents report high rates of receiving positive feedback when with

friends and proposed that adolescents’ interactions with friends resemble

positive feedback systems, in which a spirit of mutual affirmation both feeds

joyous emotion and encourages extranormative behavior. Indeed, as the

night rolls on, adolescents report higher levels of excitement and lower feelings

of control over their actions (Larson and Bradney, 1988).

These positive emotions and feedback during partying may serve valuable

functions for U.S. adolescents. It is a means for them to relieve stress,

have fun, and receive self-affirmation. Hersch (1998) describes adolescents’

experiences of dancing and slamming into each other in the mosh pit at a

party as an opportunity for them to express feelings that they cannot

express in any other context. Partying is an opportunity to experiment with

different social identities (Caldwell and Darling, 1999) and bond with a

group—to lose oneself in the experience of communitas (Larson and

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Richards, 1998). Thus, it may provide opportunities to find self-validation,

fulfilling the role of free time envisioned in the romantic view of free time.

Nevertheless, an environment that is dominated by positive feedback

has the potential to encourage deviant behavior. Positive feedback systems

become deviation amplifying and can engender runaway positive feedback

dynamics that spiral out of control (Buckley, 1967). Lefkowitz (1998)

described parties in a wealthy New Jersey suburb in which drunkenness was

the norm, fights and violent behavior broke out, and casual sexual interactions

took place, all seemingly as part of the fun. In one extreme example,

this runaway dynamic led to most of the furniture and dishes in an adolescent’s

home being destroyed. It is not surprising, therefore, that greater

involvement in partying is associated with greater deviant behavior.

Caldwell and Darling (1999) found that adolescents who spent more time

partying reported greater use of alcohol and drugs.

In choosing to focus on partying, we are highlighting an activity that

may be particularly prone to encouraging risk behavior. But other research

also finds correlations between amount of time spent in the larger category

of unstructured activities with peers and some of the same risk behaviors

(McHale, Crouter, and Tucker, 2001; Osgood and others, 1996). There is a

cause-and-effect issue to consider here. In a longitudinal study with a much

younger age group, McHale, Crouter, and Tucker (2001) found that adolescents’

adjustment and conduct problems predicted subsequent time spent

hanging out with friends. But hanging out had a less clear longitudinal relationship

to adjustment and problems. Thus, youth with predispositions to

deviance may spend more time with peers. However, within a longitudinal

study of those eighteen to twenty-six years old, Osgood and others (1996)

found that amount of unstructured time with peers, including going to parties,

predicted criminal behavior, alcohol use, and drug use. Hence, there is

good reason to believe that unstructured time with peers can promote

deviant behavior.

These findings confirm some of the concerns about unstructured and

unsupervised time articulated in the Protestant ethic. From a cross-cultural

vantage point, the fact that American youth are permitted to spend time in

these activities undoubtedly contributes to their high rates of deviance and

substance use. But it is important to stress that not all informal socializing,

or all partying, leads to involvement in deviant behaviors. Caldwell and

Darling (1999) found that the degree of parental monitoring received by an

adolescent had a significant negative correlation with substance use. When

parents paid attention to where their adolescent children went, these youth

reported less time partying, but also less delinquent behavior and substance

use regardless of how much time they spent partying. Perhaps these adolescents

went to more supervised parties or were more resistant to deviant

behavior when they did. Another finding of the study by Caldwell and

Darling (1999) was that teens’ level of substance use was related to their

susceptibility to peer conformity. Adolescents who had a low score on peer

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conformity also had less substance use, regardless of the amount of time

they actually spent partying. Resistance to peer conformity therefore helps

an adolescent avoid the enticing vortex of fun and deviance associated with

partying. Some American youth may be able to obtain the developmental

benefits of self-exploration and self-affirmation attributed to social interactions

with peers without being swept into risky behavior.

Organized Youth Activities, with Special Attention

to Sports

Whereas peer social interaction and partying highlight the tensions between

the American romantic philosophy and the Protestant ethic, organized

youth activities represent the test case for the newer rational-instrumental

point of view. These activities embody an approach that gives youth some

degree of agency and self-control, but within a channel of adult structure.

This category includes activities that are organized by adults but voluntarily

chosen by youth. Over the past century, the United States has

developed a rich culture of school extracurricular activities and communitybased

organizations, providing a wide range of activity choices for youth,

from sports to arts to participation in faith-based, service, and entrepreneurial

groups. Over four hundred national organizations provide structured

activities for youth, and there are tens of thousands of small, local

programs (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). Participation

in these activities is growing and is getting new infusions of money

from the U.S. federal government (National Research Council, 2002). The

time that teens spend in these activities is more than that spent in East Asian

countries, although it is matched by some European countries (Alsaker and

Flammer, 1999; Larson and Verma, 1999).

We focus on sports because they account for the largest amount of U.S.

adolescents’ time and have received the most research attention. Sports are

highly valued within the United States and have been called an American

religion (Novak, 1976). Most American parents readily support and encourage

their children’s participation in sports, because they see sports, like

work, as a way to build character and prepare for the competitive demands

of adult life (Siegenthaler and Gonzalez, 1997). For adolescents, success in

sports also provides status with peers (Siegenthaler and Gonzalez, 1997),

and the symbols of sports involvement—uniforms, letter jackets, and Tshirts—

carry prestige.

One national study found that 55 percent of high school senior boys

and 30 percent of girls took part in school sports (U.S. Department of

Education, 2000). Girls’ rates of involvement have been increasing steadily

since the mid-1970s (Seefeldt, Ewing, and Walk, 1993).

Adolescents’ subjective experience of sports is similar to and different

from their experience in unstructured peer social interaction. The similarity

is that teens report positive emotion; they enjoy sports (Scanlan and

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Simons, 1992). The difference is that, in contrast to socializing and partying,

participants report high rates of challenge and deeper concentration

(Larson and Kleiber, 1993). Youth are motivated and engaged in ways that

do not happen regularly in any other part of their lives (Larson, 2000).

Their experience of sports stands out from nearly all other activities, including

socializing and schoolwork, in providing enjoyment where they are

exerting concerted effort toward a goal.

The rational-instrumental philosophy argues that this type of motivated

engagement in challenge is associated with the development of important

social, emotional, and cognitive skills, and research is beginning to bear this

out. In a cross-sectional study, adolescents reported having a wide array of

developmental experiences in sports, particularly experiences of learning

initiative, emotional regulation, and physical skills (Hansen, Larson, and

Dworkin, forthcoming). Importantly, they reported having these learning

experiences more frequently than when hanging out with friends. Selfreports

on learning, of course, do not provide definitive proof. But in a controlled

longitudinal study, Eccles and Barber (1999) found that adolescents

who participated in sports showed improved grade point averages, had

increased attachment to school, and were more likely to attend college.

In sum, research is beginning to support the argument of the rationalinstrumental

philosophy that American adolescents’ participation in sport

is associated with positive development.

This conclusion needs to be qualified, however, by data showing that

sports also have developmental costs for some American youth. Hansen,

Larson, and Dworkin (forthcoming) found that compared to other organized

youth activities, teens reported higher rates of negative experiences

in sports, particularly experiences of negative peer dynamics and inappropriate

actions by coaches. The competitive nature of sports can elicit behavior

in youth, their parents, and coaches that undermines the developmental

benefits (Brustad, Babkes, and Smith, 2001; Siegenthaler and Gonzalez,

1997). An emphasis on winning at all costs can encourage cheating and

impair moral development (Larson and Kleiber, 1993). In their longitudinal

study, Eccles and Barber (1999) found that participation in sports was

also associated with an increase in alcohol use among high school students.

Growing use of performance-enhancing drugs by youth is another cause for

concern (Siegenthaler and Gonzalez, 1997). U.S. adolescents’ participation

in sports, then, can be a double-edged sword.

These negatives represent not so much a refutation of the instrumentalrational

philosophy as a signal to refine it. Accumulating evidence suggests

that these negatives are not intrinsic to sports and can be much reduced

when the emphasis on competition is moderated. Adolescents’ development

appears to be fostered when coaches focus on skill development rather than

winning (Roberts and Treasure, 1992). Smoll, Smith, Barnett, and Everett

(1993) found that when coaches were trained to increase their supportiveness

and instructional effectiveness, players’ self-esteem and enthusiasm

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increased. Positive and supportive attitudes of parents can also improve the

athletic experience of adolescents (Brustad, Babkes, and Smith, 2001;

Seefeldt, Ewing, and Walk, 1993).

Other organized youth activities, though accounting for less time

among U.S. adolescents, appear to provide the developmental opportunities

of sports with fewer negatives. Participation in arts, clubs, and hobbies elicits

the same favorable psychological conditions as sports: adolescents report

enjoyment, high motivation, concentration, and challenge (Larson and

Kleiber, 1993). And compared to sports, youth in these activities reported

a wider range of learning experiences, including development of prosocial

norms, leadership skills, and social capital, with fewer negative experiences

than in sports (Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin, forthcoming). In longitudinal

research, these activities are associated with positive long-term outcomes

(Eccles and Barber, 1999). Currently, research on diverse organized youth

activities is increasing in the United States and promises to refine application

of the rational-instrumental model to improve the experience that teens

have in organized voluntary activities.

Conclusion

American newspapers and magazines periodically run stories expressing

concern that American adolescents are “overprogrammed” (Meeks and

Mauldin, 1990). The gist of these articles is that between schoolwork, jobs,

and organized programs, youth are involved in too many structured activities,

creating stress and denying them the freedom to be themselves. These

articles may resonate with American adults because many of *them* are overscheduled

and stressed. But they are oddly incongruous with the fact that

American adolescents have more free time than youth in other nations, and

most of this is spent in unstructured activities. The sympathy these stories

evoke may have less to do with how youth actually spend time than with

the underlying romantic philosophy that youth need large amounts of time

to be young and explore.

Curiously, there are few or no data yet to support this dominant

American idea that abundant unstructured free time is beneficial for youth.

On the contrary, several major studies, as we have reported, suggest that the

large amounts of time many U.S. youth spend hanging out are a liability

(McHale, Crouter, and Tucker, 2001; Osgood and others, 1996). Partying

represents the test case for the two philosophies, and data suggest a largely

negative record: youth who spend more time hanging out and partying

show more deviant behavior and substance use. These findings represent a

challenge to the American romantic philosophy that youth benefit from

large amounts of unstructured time.

We urge caution, though, in too quickly jumping to the conclusion that

American adolescents’ unstructured free time is of little or negative value.

Insufficient research has been carried out to evaluate what may be more

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intangible and difficult-to-research benefits from U.S. adolescents’ free time.

Good theoretical arguments can be made for the benefit of play in development

(Piaget, 1962; Singer, 1994). The self-exploration, learning of social

skills, stress reduction, and experience of affirmation that come from

unstructured free-time activities may well be important. American teens

engage in a wide variety of activities during this time, and it would be a serious

mistake to overlook the enormous variations in what they might gain

from these different choices. We also resist the ultimate implication of a

rational-instrumental approach that says all of youth’s time should be governed

by utilitarian analysis.

A pivotal consideration is the role that adults play in structuring and

supervising adolescents’ free-time activities. Although American adolescents

prefer partying in situations where adults are absent, evidence suggests that

adults need to be close enough and involved enough to hold in check the

type of positive feedback dynamics that lead to deviant behavior.

Adults can also serve an important role in creating and supporting

organized youth activities that provide structured choices for adolescents’

free time. Consistent with the rational-instrumental philosophy, preliminary

evidence indicates that organized activities provide valuable contexts

for adolescent development. Research also suggests that adults best contribute

to these activities not by imposing their own structure on the activity

but by providing a framework for youth participation. This includes

reinforcing the challenges in an activity, limiting deviant behavior, and providing

support (National Research Council, 2002). The questions we have

been asking here about the appropriate balance of adult versus adolescent

control can also be posed within organized youth activities. Inside these

contexts, and across all of adolescents’ free time, a central issue for future

research—and for the American experiment—will be continuing to struggle

with these questions. We need to refine our understanding of how much

freedom adolescents should be given to be the agents of their own development,

versus how much this experience of agency can be enhanced by

intelligent support and guidance from adults.