

THE EFFECT OF SPORTS ON YOUTH RESILIENCE AND WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT:

Through semi-structured interview and observation of 50 youths at Beyond Social Services, the study examines a relationship between sports and well-being. The hypothesis is that engaging in sports activities increases resilience among youths at-risk, which positively contributes to their subjective well-being. Well-being was measured as a state of happiness and satisfaction with life; while resilience is based on four domains proposed in the Circle of Courage model. The results show that type and duration of playing sports influence the sense of mastery, independence, generosity and belonging among youths at-risk. Sports also have an implication on youths' general state of well-being, which is currently not very high. The results could be used for further improvements of youths programs at Beyond to tailor youths' developmental needs.

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INTRODUCTION

Sports activities have been an important component of the Youth United program at Beyond Social Services (Beyond in short). Activities organized range from creating Beyond sports teams to guidance in sports activities organized by youths in their natural setting. This study is conducted as an attempt to understand the effect of sports on youth resilience and well-being through the sports programs offered by Beyond. Knowing different aspects of the influence of sports on youths can help the organization direct its programs to better fit youths' growth needs.

Well-being is an important indicator of the quality of life. Regardless of ages, subjective well-being is the ultimate purpose of human activities. We work and consume to make ourselves happy; we help others to make them happy. While social services provision usually target more concrete goals like low rate of delinquency and poverty, it is worthwhile to look at well-being as another layer of influence of social services. For youths at-risk, Bendtro et al. points out four growth needs necessary for healthy development: mastery, independence, generosity and belonging (Lotter, 2003). Activities that increase the four domains will subsequently increase subjective well-being.

Drawing the link between sports and well-being through examining the four growth needs also fits into the strength-based approach in social work. Instead of spoon-feeding clients by satisfying immediate needs, social services providers highlight clients' strengths in order to improve their sense of control and achievement, helping them to cope with life on their own (Powell et al., 1997). Sport is an excellent platform for youths to find their strengths and thus self-confidence, not only for youths who have sports ability, but also for those seeking like-minded friends. In a 2009 study, Greenleaf and colleagues show that sports participation in high school can increase psychological well-being (i.e. body image, physical competence, instrumentality, etc.) and physical activity involvement in colleges among female youths. For youths at-risk, the targeted group of social services for youths in Beyond, sport is not merely an entertaining activity but is also a positive way to redirect their energy from delinquency.

1. Conceptualization of sports and well-being

1.1. Sports

Sports are physical activities that increase physical fitness and produce entertainment (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2008). Activities without a significant physical component like chess aren't included as sports in this study. However, it's important to note that leaving out such activities doesn't rebuff their influences on well-being.

The effects of sports are examined from three aspects: duration, type and engagement. Duration of playing sports is the length of sports participation. The longer an individual participates in a sport, the more sport characteristics affect other aspects of life. In other words, the individual adapts to requirements of the sport (Pierce et al., 1982). A long-time sportsman tends to develop endurance, determination and persistence due to repetitively facing challenges during practice and tournaments.

Type of sports, i.e. a team or an individual sport, creates different requirements for the players. For example, a team sport requires collaboration between team members and sacrifice of individual benefits for the team benefits; while an individual sport creates the maximum opportunity for self-expression. The different requirements of each type result in different characteristics and developmental trends in youths.

Engagement refers to the degree of involvement in sports. It projects the individual's motivation to play sports and the meaning of sports to him or her. As Tang & Hall (2006) point out, an intrinsic motivation to play sports (i.e. play to improve oneself, play for fun, etc.) leads to longer engagement in the long run than an extrinsic motivation (i.e. play to please others). Similarly, how an individual appraises the meaning of a sport decides the direction of influence of that sport on his or her characteristic development. Engagement in an activity predicts motivation and effort in dealing with obstacles, which in turn affects performance.

1.2. Well-being

According to Diener (2009), subjective well-being includes happiness, life satisfaction and positive affect. In this study, I look mainly at life satisfaction and happiness. For youths at-risk, positive affect isn't a good indicator of well-being because their reported emotion is largely influenced by complicated daily situations, especially when interviews were conducted once only.

It should be noted that well-being measured here is subjective well-being, i.e. well-being measured on personal standards. The standard will vary from individual to individual. Such a subjective measurement is different from judging youth well-being score against (a) a national score or (b) development milestones. The subjective measurement requires youths to compare their current level of happiness and life satisfaction against their ideal level of well-being; while the objective measurements require researchers compare the percentage of youths reporting happy and satisfied with their life to (a) the nationwide percentage of youths at-risk reporting the same, or (b) the percentage of youths at the same age reporting similarly. On a large scale, the objective measurements are a goal easier to achieve; whereas the subjective measurement leads to improvements of programs tailored to individual needs and capacities.

1.3. Circle of Courage

Bendro et al. proposed a model of resilience and positive youth development basing on four sacred values among Native Americans: (1) belonging, the need to be a part of a community or a circle of significant others; (2) independence, a sense of autonomy and self-discipline; (3) mastery, the need to feel social, physical and cognitive competence; and (4) generosity, the need to give back to one's community, both in term of helping, forgiving and appropriate egocentricity (Lotter, 2003).

According to Bendro, these values reflect aspects of self-esteem which is crucial for the development of resilience among youths at-risk. Four components of self-esteem are: significance, competence, power and virtue. Belonging to a community increases the sense of being accepted by others (significance). Mastery of skills increases the sense of competence. Independence in action and thoughts shows the

ability to control oneself and influence others (power). Finally, virtue – the worthiness of oneself judged by cultural values – is closely linked to generosity – a core value of all cultures worldwide (virtue).

The model is called “Circle of Courage” to emphasize the equal importance of the four components in youths’ resilience. Its perspective is particularly applicable for youths at-risk because of the strength-based focus. Studies and program using this model have also targeted youths with special needs like youths in home cares and adolescent treatment centres, youths with behaviour disorder and those in conflict with law (Lee and Perales, 2008; Lotter, 2003).

2. Hypothesis:

This study aims to draw a link between sports and well-being. I hypothesize that sports participation increases youth well-being. This relationship is mediated by four domains of the Circle of Courage (belonging, independence, generosity, mastery). Youths playing different types of sport for different durations have different senses of belonging, independence, generosity and mastery, thus differ in subjective well-being. In particular, I hypothesize that team sports increases belonging and generosity; however, if the team is too well-structured, independence of individual members decreases. Moreover, youths playing sports for a longer duration have better sense of mastery.

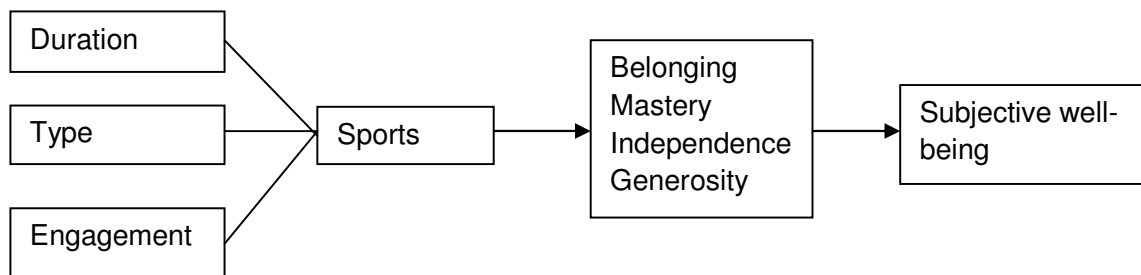


Figure 1: Hypotheses proposed in this study

METHOD

3. Participants

50 youths participated in the study, providing information in different types and depths. 96% participants are youths participating in programs offered by Beyond Social Services or using facilities at Beyond’s drop-in centre. Apart from one participant aged 23 years old who used to be a regular at Beyond, the remaining participants are from 12 to 16 years old. 50% of them are male.

4. Measurement design and procedure

The assessment of both the independent variable (sports participation) and dependent variable (four domains of the Circle of Courage and subjective well-being) is done through semi-structured interviews and observations.

4.1. Semi-structure interview

12 youths participated in the interview, in which 9 of them completed all components of the interview. Of the 9 youths, 1 participant was female. 83% interviewees play a sport or more. To reduce fatigue, the interview was divided into smaller components, conducted over several days, which partly explains why 3 youths didn't complete the interview (another reason is these youths' reluctance to provide information to the interviewer). 4 youths completed the whole questionnaire in the first interview attempt.

The questionnaire covers information about sports participation, 4 domains of the Circle of Courage model and well-being. Sports participation include questions on duration, type of sports participated and the level of engagement in sports (i.e. frequency of practice, interest in playing sports, affect during playing sports). The scale on the four growth needs is designed following the Resilience scale (Seah & Tang, 2011). Subjective well-being is measured by the Satisfaction with Life scale (Diener, 2009) and youths' narration of their life experience. The complete questionnaire is presented in the Appendix.

4.2. Observation

Systematic observation was carried out once during a sports tournament by Beyond Social Services in December 2011 and multiple times during interviews and interactions with youths at the Beyond drop-in centre. In the tournament there were 2 female teams and 3 male teams, each with 6 to 10 members. The female teams played captain's ball and the males played futsal, both are team sports. During 5 hours of the tournament, all the teams were observed in terms of intra-team and inter-team interaction, as well as youths' attitude toward playing sport. Similarly, during interviews and interactions with youths at the drop-in centre, I sought for information about their interaction with each other in a non-sports setting. These data contribute to the understanding of their personality and social relationships.

RESULT

5. Sports:

5.1. Type of sports:

Both team sports and individual sports were found in the sample studied. Team sports include soccer and futsal, captain's ball, track and field; individual sports include swimming, skating. Although individual sports don't require collaboration during playing, in fact all youths interviewed who play individual sports play it in a group with friends, like a group of skating friends or swimming friends. Thus the effect of sport type on youth implies how much a team-player a youth is, rather than how strong his/her social network is.

Of the interviewed youths, participants joining team sports outnumbered those in individual sports (6 and 3 respectively). The sport most commonly played is soccer.

5.2. Duration:

Except for one youth interviewed who doesn't play sport, the remaining youths have played for more than a year, with the average duration of 3 years. Team sports players play for one or many of the following teams: their school team, Youth United team organized by Beyond, and team of neighbourhood youths. Individual sports players form their own group. On average, youths playing individual sports have participated for a shorter period (1-2 years) than those in team sports (4 years). This discrepancy can be explained by the larger number of participants interviewed participated in team sports in comparison to individual sports.

5.3. Engagement:

All participants playing sports showed an interest in the activity. The most common reason given was because sport is fun. It is thus easy to understand why these youths practice sport weekly, following not only the compulsory school team practice schedule but also the voluntary practice with the Youth United team and their neighbourhood team.

However, among team sports players, a raising problem to self-formed teams of youths in the same neighbourhood is their lack of time to practice due to personal working and learning schedule. These teams have a tendency to die out after a few years. This problem is more prominent in female soccer teams. One soccer team set up by a group of 6 Beyond girls disbanded after two sessions because the girls were lazy to come for practice.

It should be noted that having a coach in the team, despite its representation of a well-structured team, doesn't increase involvement in practice. Youths look at the role of a coach more in term of professional support than in term of team connection and motivation. A captain may play a different role from the coach but youths in this study mentioned their captain more in team decision making.

On the contrary, youths playing individual sports like skating and swimming are less bounded by the absence of team members during practice. Although they gather and play in group, each individual can practice on their own without reliance on other team mates. Youths who remain in the group after a year tend to be those having intrinsic motivation to play sport, thus these groups may last longer than some self-formed teams.

The meaning of sport to these youths varies with age. For youths aged from 13 to 16 years old, sport plays the dominant role in their life. They talked about sport as “[their] life, [their] biggest interest”. Some participants said that they played sport because “it [was] fun” and they could “learn skills” which underline their sense of self-competence. Sport is also the centre of their circle of friends, their schedule of activities, and excellence in sport is latter shown to greatly influence their self-concept.

In contrast, one participant of older age (23 years old) looked at sport merely from its benefit to health. There are several explanations for this difference in perspective. Firstly, it implies that as youths grow, more life activities beyond sports are integrated into their narrative of life; therefore the importance of a single activity, i.e. sports, reduces depending on its impacts on their past. For this 23-year-old participant,

sports might have been only one of the many sources of entertainment, thus its meaning to him as a matured young adult is less significant than among youths. Secondly, this participant is very high in trait of Openness to Experience. Openness to Experience is one of the five personality traits; it describes the willingness to try out new things, creativity and enjoyment of cultural matters such as music, art and literature (Perugini & Gallucci, 1997). Besides soccer, this participant also joined many other sports and cultural activities, including dragon dance (dragon dance is a Chinese sport-related activity which he joined although his ethnic is Malay). He also likes to travel and dreams of living in another country where the law is less restrictive. His personality trait results in his participation in a wide range of activities, de-centring the role of sport in his life experience.

6. Effect of sports on 4 domains of the Circle of Courage

The four domains of the Circle of Courage measured in this study are sport-specific. I study sport-specific instead of global belonging, mastery, independence and generosity because the latter is confounded with a lot of socio-economic and personality factors. For example, parents' support and praise in childhood leads to a higher self-concept and confidence, thus in many areas including sport the individual has a high sense of mastery, which leads to higher independence and sometimes higher generosity.

By measuring sport-specific domains, the link between sports participation variables (type, duration and engagement) and the domains is easier to examine.

6.1. Belonging

In the context of sports, belonging is youths' relationship with friends and others whom they play sports with. Team sports bring individuals together to play for a common purpose; therefore they facilitate a feeling of belonging to a group or community. On the other hand, youths playing individual sports develop a sense of individual achievement more than team spirit. Thus my hypothesis is that youths in team sports have a higher sense of belonging. The more structured the team is, the more belonging it creates between members.

As youths in both team sports and individual sports play in groups, the effect of sports on belonging (the main effect) is hard to separate between team and non-team sports. For self-formed team playing team sports where youths call their friends in to play soccer and captain's ball together, the main effect is confounded with the quality of existing friendship. As a result, in this part I evaluate the relationship between youths who haven't known each other before but play together in school team or Beyond team.

Interviews show that playing sports in the same team doesn't draw youths closer together. Of the 12 youths interviewed, 3 participate in both school team and self-formed team. They were close to only one of the teams or to none at all. Duration of participation in the team moderates this relationship. Newcomers tend to be more distant to the team. A 14-year-old youth claimed that he is closer to his school team with whom he has practiced for 5 years than the Beyond team he recently joined for a few sessions.

When duration is controlled for, those who befriend with team mates in one of the teams are less close to their school team than the self-formed team from the neighbourhood or the Beyond team. They are closer to the group who shares more similarity to personality. Youths in the same neighbourhood tend to have similar socio-economic background, thus they understand each other more. Similarly, many youths joining the Beyond team with the hope to find friends nicer than the other neighbourhood kids who may draw them into smoking, gang fights and using drug. One youth told me that he likes friends at Beyond because they are good-natured. A 15-year-old female interviewee said that she is closer to her neighbourhood team than the school team because her neighbourhood friends accept her while her school teammates call her strange. Yet even in the neighbourhood team she also suffers from her all-male team mates' discrimination of a female playing soccer. Despite that fact, she interprets that the prejudice from the neighbourhood team is due to her female status, which encourages her to play better to showcase her ability; while the prejudice from the school team is due to her inability to fit in, which draws her away from the female team mates.

Another evidence supporting "birds of the same feather flock together" is through my observation of a practice session of the Beyond soccer team. Youths from the same neighbourhood or who have befriends with each other for a long time came in separate small groups to the soccer field and left in the same manner. They also sat in small groups during the break. In contrast, in another occasion when I interacted with a group of 7 Beyond youths from the same neighbourhood who usually gather together at the playground in the evening, they sat together in a big circle and joked with each other even when a stranger (the interviewer) asked questions to each of them separately. Thus it's easier to create a strong team with youths from the same neighbourhood.

This result also goes against the proposed hypothesis that a structured team increases belonging. School teams with a coach, a captain and clearly defined roles don't necessary mean higher attachment; whereas in self-formed teams which members have no fixed positions and sometimes only temporary captains for competitive matches with other teams, youths do more activities together besides sport.

Despite their close relationship with friends in the neighbourhood, a common theme among youths of both genders is the difficulty in trusting friends. Their personal life must have brought them a lot of troubles in the past that they are no longer able to trust friends who they play with, family then takes the highest position in their ranking of relationship. During interviews, youths repeatedly mention the need to find trustworthy friends and to stay clear from bad temptations. On one hand, this can be considered a positive feature in youths as a result of their adaptation to a turbulent living environment; this is the basis of their resilience to negative influences. On the other hand, distrust is also a barrier to youths' ability to form long-term relationships outside family setting. Friendship, even though important to them (it is one of the development goals at the adolescence and young adulthood periods), is hard to achieve. An extreme extension of friend discrimination is distrust in everyone apart from family members, as one interviewed youth expressed. Consequently, this youth interacts with others (especially youths at Beyond) in term of reciprocity (helping others in return of their favour to him), he also doesn't intend to form lasting relationship with friends and girlfriends, which can be detrimental to his well-being later. Less extreme effects of the difficulty in trusting friends are the limited number of close relationship made, resulting in a smaller social network among youths.

Group identity is stronger in a female team than in a male team. One of the two captain's ball female teams I observed in the tournament consisted of 20 primary school girls who live in the same neighbourhood. They have practiced twice a week for the last two years. Even when they were divided into two sub-teams during the tournament, their group identity was still the strongest among teams: they wore team T-shirts, cheered for each other and for the sub-teams during the matches, and sang team songs. They also showed objection when their team member talked to the opponent team. The other female team was less bonded to each other because this team of 6 girls had been formed only a day before the tournament, thus they hardly showed support to each other during and after the matches. This fact again supports the positive correlation between duration and belonging. None of the male teams in the same tournament had a team uniform or cheered loudly in a group when their team mates were playing. One explanation is strong emotional expression tends to be discouraged in males. At the same time, the male youths appeared to be more relaxed than the females in mixing with other teams; they were also less concerned about winning and losing. It's possible to conclude that in general, male youths consider sports more as an entertaining activity than an expression of team unity.

6.2. Generosity

In the context of sports, generosity is the ability to help team mates and others in acquisition of skills and the ability to forgive others when they make mistakes, which facilitates problem solving and team relationship. Because team sports require cooperation, I hypothesized that youths playing team sports are more generous, helpful and forgiving than those in individual sports.

In fact, since youths in this study play sports with friends, the act of helping and forgiving between youths in the same team or group can be attributed to both generosity and existing friendship. Thus I look at generosity in a bigger context: not only through the interaction inside the team or group but also between youths and other people outside their group who also play sports.

All youths interviewed show that regardless of types, sports players help each other in practice. They show each other soccer techniques, skating tricks, etc. Generosity comes spontaneously, as one female soccer player said that her team mates were willing to guide her on soccer skills despite their usual discrimination on her position in their all-male team. Similarly, a track and field runner found himself responsible as a senior member of the team to help new players. In brief, youths consider helping a natural action to take.

One might ask, given that these youths find it hard to trust friends, how can they help each other so easily? I will use my observation of one interaction between two youths at Beyond's drop-in centre to explain one of the reasons for the prevalence of generosity. These two youths have befriended each other for a month and they aren't close to each other. Both of them were playing a Facebook strategy game which requires creating one's own empire and establishing an army to fight against enemies (other players' armies) to gain points. The game also allows players to send gifts like tools and weapons to each other. At the time the interaction occurs, one of the two youths (16-year-old male) who was at a higher level in the game needed a tool to increase his power. Although the other youth (15-year-old male) is at a lower level, he sent one of his most powerful gifts to his friend, with the hope that the other would send one back in return. The older youth accepted this gift at first without the intention to send back a gift,

even though he previously received a gift from the same friend. He continuously said that he would send back one gift if he received ten more. It should be noted that after an incident of betrayal by his best friend in the past, this 16-year-old youth seriously lacked trust on other people, he said one should believe in no one but oneself. The conversation between them continued on Facebook, with the older youth sending nonsensical messages (like ?!#0~1>?) and the younger one patiently replying with greetings (like “Happy new year”). After five minutes, the older youth sent back an equally powerful gift. Although this interaction isn’t representative of all cases, it shows how important reciprocity is in the life of these two youths at-risk. Youths help each other because they used to receive help from the same person or from a team mate or group mate. Such respect for reciprocity not only guarantees that youths gain something from the relationship, which is important to those youths who are highly concerned about distrust and exploitation, but also maintains the relationship over time. The interaction also shows that when treated nicely, youths at-risk will have good behaviours.

Another way to explain generosity is through responsibility. Youths find themselves responsible to help others in improving their skills because they are a part of the team or because they are senior members. One example is the reason given by the track and field runner mentioned above. Two other youths (a 16-year-old male and a 14-year-old female) were willing to give up their favourite positions to play goal keeper when none of their team mates wanted to take it, although none of them claimed to be close to the team. This reflects the goodwill to avoid team conflicts and assist team members in playing. Moreover, in general, youths in team sports all highly value support and responsibility to the team. When asked about what made a good captain, they stressed that besides the ability to lead the team, the captain should be able to take responsibility and be respected by other members. If we consider the captain as a role model for other members, then a responsible captain reflects the team emphasis on responsibility. Responsibility can also be looked at from how important it is to these youths to keep their promise. In the gift giving story above, at first the 16-year-old youth was reluctant to promise that he would send a gift back, since he knew he would hardly do so, although the story had a happy ending.

Besides helping, forgiveness is another expression of generosity. All the youths interviewed said that they never blamed each other for wrong decision making or losing a match. A 16-year-old male said that in his self-formed neighbourhood team, there wasn’t a captain; thus although he initiated ideas most of the time, the whole team made the final choice. After the match, when his rejected ideas proved to be right, he never put on an air of superiority but still respected the team decision in the following occasions. Similarly, all the youths said that they weren’t too concerned about winning or losing a match, consequently they never blamed their team mates for losing. It might be the attitude of playing for enjoyment (a large part of which is good team spirit and sportsmanship) that makes them less strict on the mistakes others make.

6.3. Independence

In the context of sports, independence is the ability to solve problems by themselves. To team sports, the emphasis is on interaction between team members during problem solving; while to individual sports, what’s more common is how the individual overcomes hindrances during training.

To youths who play in self-formed group, there is no one to rely on to solve problems during playing. As a result, they place great emphasis on mutual understanding and conflict avoidance. A 23-year-old respondent said that when conflicts occurred, team members needed to understand each other. He always apologized first and waited for the understanding of team mates; in a similar attitude, he was always open and generous with the mistake others made. Another 16-year-old interviewee said that when he wanted to persuade others, he didn't assert his ideas too aggressively; instead, he waited till others tried their way out and admit that his way was true. He also said that when the team needed to choose a captain, they use "paper, scissor, stone" – a very simple childlike method of choosing winners – to decide the "lucky" one. Compromise between team mates is a necessary solution to conflicts. Sometimes compromise can take the form of silence and acceptance, yet this silence is different from the temporary silence in order to later seek help from those with higher power like a coach or a captain.

Those playing in well-structured teams rely more on coach and captain in decision making and problem solving, although all of them try to sort things out by themselves first. One male youth aged 15 said that he learned soccer skills through observing and imitating other players. Only when he couldn't do it himself that he asked for help. When youths in these teams can't persuade their team mates, they seek the help of their coach, teacher or captain. Choosing the position in the team is also the choice of the coach; whereas in a self-formed team, youths take a position according to their own interest or as a result of negotiation. In brief, a less structured team encourages generosity and independence more than a well-organized team, especially in problem solving.

Team sports players insist that a coach is important to keep the team in structure and to guide skills and strategies. Individual sports players don't need a coach. They tend to practice by themselves, relying on each other (other players) to master skills. Two skaters and a swimmer interviewed said that they didn't need coaches after getting basic training. This can be partly because of their amateur status. Yet soccer players who only play for their neighbourhood team thought a coach was important although they didn't participate in competitions. Another reason is that individual sports facilitate a higher sense of mastery, thus individual sports players are more confident in their ability to self-improve skills. Evidence supporting this aspect is that when mentioning coach, individual sports players mention the benefit of a coach to technical training; while the team sports players mention both professional aspect (skill training) and team unity aspects (connecting team members with different training style, solving team problems and conflicts, etc.).

Independence can also be looked at from the relationship between youths and their family regarding sports participation. Not all parents support youths playing sports. To a female soccer player, her parents objected because of high physical demands of the sports. To some male players, it was worry about injury. Nevertheless, family disapproval doesn't matter much to youths. They either ignore their parents or roughly explain to them the benefits of sports, but never use too much time to persuade. To them, going against the disapproval is too common, which fits the typical teenager behaviours. Yet they still consider family as the most important relationship, friendship ranks only the second.

6.4. Mastery

In the context of sports, mastery refers to the feeling of achievement and competence. Youths high in mastery rate themselves relatively high in physical and social skills needed in sports participation. They are also confident to initiate ideas for the team and manage problems related to skills like injury, losing a match or playing less well than other members. Because frequent practice improves sports ability, I hypothesize that duration increases mastery.

The data collected show that, contrary to the proposed hypothesis, duration of sports participation doesn't increase youths' perceived mastery. The common answers youths gave when asked "Are you good at sport?" were "I'm ok", "I'm not as good as my friends" or "I'm not as good as those in the national team". Youths who have played for a longer duration (4 years or more) didn't see themselves more competent than those having played for 1-2 years. One reason is that youths having played for a longer duration tend to raise their standard of "good". For example, a 15-year-old male who played soccer for 5 years compared himself to players in the national team; while a 15-year-old female said that after 8 years practising soccer, she was better than her fellow female team mates but not as good as the male youths she played with in the neighbourhood. By targeting higher and higher standard over time, youths adopt the need of self-improvement. Additionally, since youths tend to play sports for fun, especially male soccer players, they are less likely to suffer from dissatisfaction of incompetence. Yet their low perceived mastery may reduce self-confidence in initiating ideas and managing problems.

Duration, nevertheless, affect how one player looks at another. Youths consider experienced fellow players as more skilful. A 12-year-old youth who started skating for 2 months looked at his brother with 1 year of experience in the skating group as "master of skating".

Of 12 youths interviewed, only 3 youths were completely confident of their excellence in sports. Two of them have achieved major successes in their sports career: one was a 14-year-old track and field runner who won a Special Olympics gold medal, another was a 14-year-old male youth selected for the national softball team. These achievements are indicators of their sports ability; they are visible measurable signals that boost youths' self-esteem and perceived mastery. The third youth hasn't won any title, thus his high mastery is attributed to high self-confidence, although his account of his sports career gave no explanation to this assumption. In brief, past achievement is a reliable booster of mastery among youths^{*}.

A high sense of mastery also encourages youths to participate more actively in sports. The two 14-year-old youths mentioned above, besides their field of excellence, also participated in soccer. Nevertheless both of them preferred their field of excellence more. The reasons given were precisely their excellence in one sport: "Because I'm in the national softball team" and "Because I was born to run". This relationship between mastery and preference can be interpreted in both directions: (1) mastery increases preference, youths like doing what they are good at; or (2) preference increases mastery, youths do well in what they like. The third youth in this group of high mastery, a 16-year-old male soccer player, also shows active participation in the team. He initiates ideas and strategies. His high mastery leads to confidence in self-

^{*} Regarding Beyond youths with high achievements in sports, besides two youths interviewed in this study, there are others who enter the U17 National Soccer team and one youth playing for the Lions.

suggested ideas and the feeling of belonging. In contrast, youths who recently joined sports team perceive themselves as less competent to other players; thus they hardly feel responsible to contribute to the team's strategies. They tend to wait for directions from old members.

One pleasantly surprising fact I found after data collection is all youths participating in the study have a positive attitude toward losing in sport. None of them expressed excessive anger or disappointment (either disappointment at themselves or at others) when they lose. They even consider it an inevitable thing in sport. This finding is surprising in the context of Singapore where kiasuism (the fear of losing) becomes a social norm. Yet it is pleasant to know that these youths have adopted an incremental view of progression in sports. They don't consider sports ability and other social cognitive skills learnt during sports participation as fixed qualities that one player possesses but the other doesn't. Instead they are willing to learn from mistakes. This incremental view isn't only crucial for a growing sense of mastery over time but it is also the basis of generosity (youths help and forgive each other because they know their team mates can improve themselves) and independence (compromise facilitates problem solving because the whole team is willing to explore and accept the best solutions).

One interesting thing to look at is how female players perceive mastery in a team sport like soccer that males typically excel. One female participant interviewed plays soccer both in an all-female team at school and an all-male team in her neighbourhood. In the all-male team, she has to encounter the prejudice from the male team mates. Although they show her techniques to improve her skills, they also look down on her, tease her playing. Nevertheless, she participates actively in both teams. One of the reasons is her extrovert personality and her close relationship with the neighbourhood youths. She fits in well with the neighbourhood guys because her characteristics are sometimes "strange" to fellow girls but are accepted by the guys. Another important reason is her passion for soccer and her resilience. She said that since guys play much better and more beautiful soccer than she does, watching them play inspires her to improve her skills.

The remaining question is how did youths acquire such a view? When asked "Why aren't you afraid of losing?", none of the youths gave a concrete answer, they smiled as if it is some obvious fact.

7. Well-being

Well-being is measured by youths' perceived satisfaction with life and happiness.

In general, most youths aren't completely happy with their life. Some youths have wishes unfulfilled; the others are unhappy seeing their friends suffering from difficulties in life. Given that these youths at-risk come from a low socio-economic background and face many troubles in their life, it is easy to understand why their ideal life is far from reality. The concern of a troublesome, uneasy living environment is also reflected in their worry about finding a good strong relationship with friends. All youths express the difficulty in trusting friends and finding the right person to befriend. Consequently, all of them rank family relationship as the safest one to place trust on. Although Beyond Social Services, through its drop-in centre and activities, provides a safer environment where youths can find friends who are less likely to involve or persuade them to involve in drinking, smoking, gang activities or having drugs, youths still keep their guard when befriending fellow youths at Beyond.

Interesting enough, when asked if they would want to change anything in their life, they also said they hadn't thought about that yet or they didn't want to change anything. Despite a life far from the ideal, youths accept the challenges and difficulties. A 23-year-old youth who had overcome the difficult period of adolescence and who have found a job now told his life story with a clear self-satisfaction. Thanks to the help of his best friend, he quit smoking and using drug and he was able to stay away from smoking during two years of national services. He narrated his story with a straightforward story line; there was no expression of hatred to those who got him involved in drugs but gratitude for his friend's help instead. Through his story he expresses a strong sense of identity and integrity.

7.1. Effect of sports on well-being

Due to the lack of a control group of non-sportsmen, well-being was measured among only sports players. This limits the study from drawing a direct correlation between sports and well-being. Thus in this part I use the level of perceived mastery, independence, generosity and belonging to explain the current level of well-being among youths at-risk at Beyond.

Research on youths has shown that although well-being is relatively stable over time, certain factors can increase well-being (for a review, see Park, 2004). Some of them are relevant to the sports context of interest here: (a) satisfaction with family, friends and oneself (although as the developmental age increases, the importance of peer relationship and self-appraisals to well-being increases); (b) participation in structured activities like team sports, games and spending time with friends; (c) accumulation of positive daily events like enjoying a hobby, helping others and talking with friends.

In general, the level of well-being of youths playing sports in this study is neither too high nor too low. We can't say they are completely satisfied with their life conditions but neither are they depressed. Some of the factors above contribute to this middling well-being.

All youths in this study express an interest in sports participation. They play for enjoyment more than for professional competitive purpose. Most youths even put sports in the centre of their life purpose. Moreover, if a structured sport activity is defined as a sport played in a group or a team, then all youths participate in structured sports. Thus sport is not only a fun activity but also brings the joy of friendship and purpose to youths. Sports create a platform for youths to meet and interact with each other, to find and befriend with those of similar characteristics, and to practice communication and problem solving skills. Team sports players in this study have a good sense of autonomy, and those in self-formed teams in particular develop compromise as an effective way to avoid team conflicts. These are essential skills for their later stages of development. Lastly, sports provide ideal opportunities for self-expression of social, physical and cognitive skills. Although the majority of youths aren't satisfied with their current level of skill, they are willing to learn and improve themselves over time. This incremental view of sports ability can be transferred to other life areas to help them overcome challenges and difficulties in life.

Although 50 youths studied are generous in helping and forgiving the friends and team mates, they are still preoccupied with the concern of finding good trustworthy friends. It is necessary to realize that although sports provide a good opportunity for youths to find friends, they may only seek those sharing

similar personality and views, and even then the quality of friendship may not be deep. This lack of friendship, when peers play an important role in the adolescent period, has an unhealthy influence on their well-being. In return, youths rely on their family as an important and the only reliable source of support. There are both advantage and disadvantage in this reliance: their strong relationship with family may help them settle family conflicts in a peaceful way (like how youths ignore their parents' disapproval of their participation in sports; whereas a more forceful way is making a fight with their parents); yet too much distress from family conflicts can be detrimental to their only reliable relationship.

7.2. How should Beyond continue to use sports to facilitate character development and improve wellbeing?

Research on well-being shows that any activity that fits their hobby and gives youths a chance to interact with friends and express themselves are valuable to youth development. Similarly the Circle of Courage model can be applied to any activity to highlight the four domains of resilience important in youths at-risk. That is to say all extracurricular activities (sports, music, computer games, etc.) that youths enjoy can be structured in a way that fits their four growth needs and increases their well-being.

Sport has its certain advantages over other activities. It has been shown to draw the interest of both genders. More importantly, participation in sports increases a variety of abilities, including physical fitness, social interaction and cognitive skills; all are crucial skills for their later development. The latter two are developed in team sports, as youths learn to belong and be generous with their team mates, and learn to solve problems arising intra-team. Being in a team allows both the expression of leadership and the adoption of teamplayer attitude. Individual sports, when played in a group, also have their own benefits: they give more chance for the individual for self-expression. Youths internally attribute success to their own effort, therefore increase their self-esteem. The study shows that youths feel responsible for helping members of their team or members of the group they play sports with. Thus sports should continue to be organized in teams (for team sports) and groups (for individual sports) to promote a sense of belonging and generosity.

In teams, it is necessary for organizers to give a space for social and cognitive skills to develop by avoiding imposition of a rigid structure (like a coach or a captain who makes all the decision for the team). Youths playing in Beyond soccer team tend to depend greatly on coach for both professional training and team bonding; whereas those in a self-formed teams develop better decision making and negotiation skills, independence as well as generosity. It is important that youth workers emphasize more on the role of youths themselves in forming and developing their own team. Youths can contribute to team formation, captain election, strategy suggestion and so on.

Another issue with team bonding is that being in a team does not necessary draw youths closer to each other, although new team members are certainly less engaging in the team. One way to deal with this problem is to create teams of youths of the same background, conveniently those in the same neighbourhood (Beyond has already done a great job in this way with strong teams from Ang Mo Kio, Tiong Bahru and Sembawang). Moreover, gender difference in group identity expression shows that more team bonding activities should be promoted. For example, each team should have team uniform, a team cheerleading chant or a team-unique victory celebrating dance.

To increase involvement of newcomers and current team members in team/group activities, we can apply the Jigsaw classroom model to sports. This model is a cooperative learning technique that has been tested and applied in many settings to reduce racial discrimination, promote cooperation and motivation in classroom interaction[†]. In sports setting, especially team sports, this model suggests that each member of the team should be assigned an equally important role in the team. The roles should not overlap so that team members are mutually dependent on each other. As a result, new members find themselves a place in the team while current members feel more responsible and connected to the team. This, however, does not undermine the role of the team captain. The captain instead can be in charge of assigning roles to members since he or she is usually the one whom others trust and listen to. The jigsaw classroom model also encourages looking at each individual's strengths in order to maximize his or her contributions to the team/group. Thus it fits well into the strength-based approach that Beyond is following.

The last advantage of sports over other activities is that it can show almost immediately one's level of competence, thus it acts as a quick feedback system for youths to celebrate their ability or practice more to improve themselves. When directed in the right way, as youths in this study are, they can adopt an incremental view of progression in sports that can be transferred to other life areas. For other group activities like volunteering, it is harder to evaluate if one is doing well, thus youths might be slower to improve themselves. Given that past achievements are reliable indicators of youths' perceived mastery, Beyond even needs to continue creating opportunities like for youths to express their ability and obtain measureable achievement. Organizing sports tournaments with prizes is an effective mastery-boosting activity that should be continued. Beyond is also cooperating with other organizations and governmental bodies to put talented youths in professional leagues, an effort which I believe is important to youths because this study shows that as youths' sports ability increases over time, they also compare themselves with higher target of mastery. Allowing youths to play with those of the same professional level motivates them to improve themselves more.

8. Limitation

The lack of a control group has reduced significantly the ability to support the link between sports and well-being. Further studies may seek to compare well-being as well as the four domains of resilience between a sports group and a non-sports group.

The study is also non-representative because of the small sample size (of 50 youths, only 12 participating in in-depth interview provide core information for the whole study, and only 1 of the 12 participants is female) and an unequal number of participants in team versus individual sports. A more representative sample is necessary for further examination.

Regarding methodology, in this study I use qualitative methods of data collection because of the difficulties in applying a paper-and-pencil questionnaire to these youths of interest. However, semi-structured interview and systematic observation have their own disadvantages, among which are questionable reliability of the scale (semi-structured interview doesn't strictly follow an established scale

[†] For detailed explanations of the technique and successful implications, refer to <http://www.jigsaw.org>

but the questions may vary from participant to participants) and subjectivity of interpretation. Subjectivity can be reduced by having more than one rater to code the data collected, which this study fails to do so.

CONCLUSION

Although this study fails to thoroughly examine the relationship between sports and subjective well-being mediated by the four domains of resilience, it has made the first step in pointing out a positive relationship between sports and the four domains and providing general information on the current state of well-being in youths at-risk at Beyond Social Services. The study has shown that sport is an activity of great interest and meaning to youths. Engaging in both self-formed and institutional sports activities not only diverts youths' energy from delinquency but also strengthens their physical, social and cognitive skills. Depending on the type, duration and level of engagement in sports that youths participate in, I have analyzed that sports can have effects on how mastery, generosity, belonging and independence are constructed in youths at-risk.

Such results help us understand more how sports should be organized in further activities at Beyond Social Services so that we can direct youths to better meet the four growth needs and develop resilience. More importantly, the study introduces a different way of looking at the goal of social services, i.e. individual well-being. I propose that well-being, or the physical, mental and social state of individuals, should no longer be the side-effect of prosocial intervention but become the target of social services.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Measure of sport participation

Which sports do you participate in?

How long have you played?

Do you have a team? How was the team formed?

How often do you practice? Do you like practising? What do you feel when you play/practice?

2. Mastery

Are you good at sports? Why do you say you are good/not good?

What position do you play? Do you choose that position by yourself? Why?

Do you encounter any difficulty during practicing? What do you do in those situations? Are you worried?

Who decides the strategy of the match? Do you initiate ideas/strategies?

3. Belonging

How many members are there in your team?

How do you choose a member?

Are you close to each other? What do you do together besides playing sports?

Do your friends help you while playing?

4. Independence

Are you a captain of the team? How was the captain selected? What do you think makes a good captain/team player?

Do you have any difficulty in talking with other members? Have you argued with each other? What do you do when argument occurs? How do you persuade your team members?

Who makes the final decision?

What do your parents say about you playing sports? Do they support you?

How do you manage time to play sports besides doing housework, homework and so on?

5. Generosity

Do you help your team member often? On what occasion (during the match/practice, outside the field, when they ask for help, etc.)

If your friend does something bad, can you forgive him/her?

6. Personality

Tell me 5 things about yourself

Tell me 5 things you believe to be true all the time

7. Social capital

Do you have many friends? Who are you close with more (friends at school, at Beyond, sport friends, friends in the neighbourhood, etc.)

Do your friends help you when you need?

Do you trust your friends?

8. Well-being

Tell me 3 happy things that happen to you recently

Tell me 3 unhappy things that happen to you recently

Are you satisfied with who you are now? Have you got the most important things you want? If you could live your life over, do you want to change anything?

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