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ABSTRACT

American adolescents spend a significant portion of their time in leisure activities, but little research has been done on adolescent extrafamilial leisure activities, either alone or with peers. This paper examines adolescents' own accounts of such activities. As part of a longitudinal study of rural youth development, semistructured interviews were conducted for 4 consecutive years with 87 students at 4 rural high schools in upstate New York. The students tended to have higher than average academic achievement and socioeconomic status. All participants described their communities as places where "there is nothing to do." Their schools provided adult imposed, structured activities in which participation was high, and were centers of both adolescent and adult activities in their communities. Outside of school activities, there were few places or activities available to rural adolescents within their communities. The students interviewed were very active and spent their leisure time constructively. They took advantage of extracurricular school activities, engaged in creative solitary activities, were quite active in volunteer community work, and enjoyed uniquely rural outdoor activities. However, geographical distance and transportation problems contributed to participants' sense of isolation. A deficit in socialization is suggested by the lack of a place in the community for peer groups to meet and engage in informal youth-structured activities. Implications for adolescent development are explored. (SV)

Solitary and Peer Group Leisure Activities of Rural Adolescents

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Running Head: Rural Adolescent Leisure Activities

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Abstract

This study examines the ways in which rural adolescents spend their leisure time. Leisure activities have been shown to have a socializing effect on participants. However, previous research has not described how adolescents spend their leisure time with others or alone and has not investigated neighborhood or community. Also absent are studies on the effects of how leisure time spent affects adolescent development. We have given rural adolescents a voice in describing their extrafamilial leisure activities when in the company of friends and when by themselves outside of school hours. The participants (N=87) in this study of four rural New York State high schools *all* described their communities as places where "there is nothing to do" and discuss the resultant effects of isolation from their peer groups. Schools in these communities provide adult imposed, structured activities in which participation is high. The school has become the focal point for both adolescent and adult activity in the rural community. Outside of school activities, there are few places or activities available to rural adolescents within their communities. Participants in the study are very active and spend their leisure time quite constructively. They take advantage of the extracurricular activities offered at school, engage in highly creative solitary activities, are quite active in volunteer work in their communities and enjoy activities that are uniquely rural in the open spaces out of doors. Geographical distance and transportation problems contribute to these rural adolescents' sense of isolation. A deficit in socialization appears to be evident in the participants' perception of a lack of a place for groups of peers to meet in the community to engage in activities that are informal and that can be structured by the youth themselves, without having to travel to neighboring cities. The developmental effects of less opportunity for socialization are explored.

Solitary and Peer Group Leisure Activities of Rural Adolescents

American adolescents spend a significant portion of their time in leisure activities. According to one study, 40% of adolescents' waking moments were spent in leisure activity (socializing, sports and games, watching television, etc.). Leisure activity occurred in various settings and interpersonal contexts. (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984).

The purpose of this study was to get a clearer picture of the leisure activities of rural adolescents and the effects of decreased availability of both community- and school-sponsored (structured or not) extracurricular activities due to recent budget cutbacks at all government levels (Smith, 1991). We focus on rural adolescent reports of extrafamilial leisure activities during time spent alone and with peers outside of the regularly scheduled school day.

Feldman and Elliott (1990) have pointed out that while much research has been done with adolescents in the contexts of peer groups, families, and schools, little information is available on their leisure activities either alone or with others. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been given to communities and their organizations that help to structure activities outside of school. School provides the majority of activities available to youth in rural communities. The activities provided extracurricularly at school create institutionalized peer groups set up and controlled by adults. Rural adolescents are spending more time with family than they might because of the lack of a place in their community for groups of peers to

"hang out." Geographical distance from each other and lack of independent transportation limit the frequency with which they can gather in larger groups. They consequently have few opportunities to meet, form, initiate and control informal peer groups, and to structure their own activities. Feldman and Elliott call for research that looks at leisure as it relates to normal adolescent development. It is apparent in this study that rural adolescents are deficient in available informal group contexts that could provide valuable supportive networks in which to gain experience with autonomy, cooperation, trust, identity, adult roles, cross-gender relations, values and aspirations. This lack of social preparation for encounter with larger groups of peers is explored in the work of Vollmer and Hedlund (1994).

Adolescents in this study engage heavily in school activities, have many worthwhile solitary pursuits, are active in supporting community through volunteer work, and maintain close friendships with small peer groups.

Background

Christen Smith (1991), the Executive Director of the American Association for Leisure and Recreation, states "Community recreation services are provided in nearly every city, town and village across the country. Programming is also available in many rural areas...(with) services...financed primarily by taxes" (pg. 11). However, economic instability and increasing poverty have characterized rural American populations in recent history and tax dollars are lacking for community recreation (Eberts and Khawaja, 1988). Recreational facilities, services and programming in rural communities are not available to all youth. Schools, parents

and adolescents have difficulty with alternative (to community agencies) fund raising for activities in economically depressed rural areas. School budgets, even at austerity levels, are being voted down two and three times with resultant cuts in extracurricular activities.

Federal financial support for recreation research goes "almost exclusively to rural recreation research" (Smith, 1991). This is misleading, however. First, because it describes monies directed to *research* rather than activities. Secondly, because the research being conducted is, in large part, in wilderness and state park areas and not *within* rural communities. Youth programs and centers appear to be sparse in rural Upstate New York and, although adolescents tend to stop attending organized recreation programs between the ages of 13 and 16 (Smith 1993), rural adolescents do not always have a gathering "place" for leisure outside of school and away from family where groups of youth can meet and structure their own free time.

A great deal of adolescents' leisure time is spent with their peers because they provide a valuable network for each other. This adolescent *community* becomes a "staging area" for acting out interpersonal developmental themes before a supportive audience and without the dangers of failure. "Hanging out", therefore becomes a pastime that can be recognized as legitimate, however, adolescents hang out in "carefully defined and limited locations" (Fine, Mortimer and Roberts 1990). (Italics ours -- please note that community here is being used as an analogy and does not mean the town in which adolescents live as it does elsewhere in this paper).

Fine, Mortimer and Roberts (1990) suggest that conceptualizing adolescence metaphorically as activity, as experience, as community, as culture, and as market provides a way of exploring what leisure means to adolescents and how they use it. They argue that leisure is instrumental for socialization because it provides opportunities for adolescents not only to structure their own lives, but to practice adult challenges and anticipate future status. Leisure "affects later educational and occupational achievement and social integration" (pg. 233). Adolescents begin their quest for identity and belonging, develop needs for emotional support and affirmation of values and aspirations, and make an adjustment in peer relations that includes heterosexual relationships around the time of puberty (Brown, 1990).

Peer groups are defined by Brown (1990) to exclude two-person relationships (dating partners or pairs of friends) and adolescents' ties with his/her entire age cohort or generation. A distinction is made between *institutionalized* (those set up and controlled by adults) and *informal* (those initiated and controlled by teenagers themselves) peer groups. Small groups of adolescents that hang around together are called (interaction-based) *cliques* and larger (reputation-based) collectives of similarly stereotyped adolescents are labeled *crowds*. Brown reports four obvious differences that occur in changing from childhood to adolescent peer groups. There is an increase in the amount of time spent with peers. There is an increase in more autonomous functioning in peer groups (without adult guidance or control) due to a change from being anchored in neighborhoods to being anchored in schools. There is now a mixing of the sexes that was not present in childhood peer groups.

And, there is an expansion to include larger groups of peers which he labels "crowds" that create peer "cultures" as context.

Howell (1989) argued that there is a critical need to update our knowledge about rural youth particularly because of recent changes in the rural economy and other social institutions that affect their development. Personal interviews permit access to the "lived experience" of adolescents (Fine, Mortimer and Roberts, 1990). We felt it important to give rural adolescents an opportunity, a voice, if you will, to tell us about various aspects of their lives and what sort of personal and shared meanings they have made in their lives. What do rural adolescents do in their spare time, and, where and with whom do they do it? What kinds of activities or places would rural adolescents like to be made available to them in the community? Are there deficiencies in the amounts or kinds of peer interaction available to rural youth and if so, what are the developmental consequences?

Project summary

This study is part of Project PRYDe (Program in Rural Youth Development). Project PRYDe is a longitudinal, qualitative study begun in 1988 and continuing to date. Semi-structured interviews were obtained for four consecutive years (1990-1993). Participants (N=87) represent adolescents from four rural high schools in upstate New York, grades 9-12, and were volunteers with parental permission required. The students tend to include a higher socio-economic status and higher academically achieving group than is representative of the total student population in each school. Generalizations taken from this study should take the

non-representativeness of these participants into account. Schools represented four differing degrees of rurality as described by Eberts (1984) and defined by the size of the largest town in the county, distance to a metropolitan center, and the percentage of residents that travels outside of the county for employment. High school graduates were interviewed for up to three years. Interview protocols were designed to probe participants' perceptions of their lives in relation to their communities, families, schools, social interaction, and identity of self (see Hedlund, 1993, for a more detailed description of procedure).

The Present Study

In this study we examine all data coded as pertaining to structured and unstructured activities in any of the five areas represented in the original interview (community, family, school, social, self) from all participants in 1990 and 1991. Participants range from 9th grade to one year out of high school (N=87 with 158 interviews). The focus for this paper is on solitary leisure pursuits and extrafamilial, out-of-school activities with peers. Rural adolescents engage in free-time activities common to all adolescents - talking on the phone, listening to music, watching videos, hanging out, etc., as well as activities specifically identifiable as rural - hunting, fishing, hiking, motorcross, snowmobiling, etc. Questions were asked in the interviews about how a participant's days were spent both in and out of school. Students were encouraged to talk about how they spent time alone, with peers, with other adults and with their families. Activities within the community, extracurricularly at school and at home were discussed.

Interview coding

The data analysis was a descriptive content analysis, interpretive in nature. A coding system developed inductively by three PRYDe researchers (interrater reliability approximately 90%) was used to chunk the narrative text of interview data into three levels of codes: Level 1 = variables conceptually defined by the structure of the interview (community, family, school, social, and self); Level 2 = specific topics within Level 1, e.g., drugs, activities, adult issues, etc.; and, Level 3 = further specificity of Level 2, e.g., drug use or drug information, educational activities or informal activities, adult teachers or adult influence (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Interviews were coded by four teams of two coders each. Every interview was coded independently by one team member, followed by a critique by the other team member and a comparison. Disagreements in coding were discussed and resolved by both team members. Blind quality control checks three times per team per school by the principal investigator have maintained interrater reliability close to the 90% level. The macro function of Wordperfect for the Macintosh computer was used to label codes and move coded segments to summary documents for males/females(N=2) per school(N=4) per conceptually defined variables(N=5), yielding 40 summary documents (Reid, 1992). Each summary document was then blindly checked by one of the developers of the original coding system (and not part of any coding team) as a further reliability check (see Hedlund, 1993, for a more detailed description of interview coding).

Our interpretation of some of the themes emerging from the data follows, illustrated by individual interview excerpts. First, we illustrate student perceptions of the lack of available community activities and their feelings about the effects of being alone and isolated from their peers for much of their leisure time. Then we consider the role of school activities in the community. Finally, we discuss the implications of distance, travel and transportation restrictions on the kinds of activities engaged in by the adolescents in this study and the kinds of community solutions offered by the adolescents themselves. The potential hazards for adolescent socialization and development achieved through leisure activity is then discussed.

Interview segments which follow are labeled "I:" for interviewer statements and "P:" for participant statements.

Perceptions of available activities

The rural adolescents participating in this study perceive an unavailability of and a need for informal peer group community activities. Most of the students in this study are quite active in school activities and so they have peer groups within the school. Between solitary leisure pursuits, friendships, dating, work, volunteer activities, and family life, their lives seem quite full. Yet they all seem to want peer group interaction without having to travel to neighboring cities -- just an informal place to hang out, an agenda of their own with activities of their own choosing. A 9th-grade female's complaint about lack of community activity outside of the school is a typical one:

> I: What's it like to live in (town)?
> P: I like it but, I mean, I like the town and it's nice because you know everyone. But it can get boring because there's only so many things you can do. I don't know, I do like it. I think I would like a change.
> I: What kind of a change?
> P: Like...the kids in our school...something more for them to do and stuff. Like I'm involved in a lot of things.I think there should be something so the students in our school could get more involved but not have it be something related to the school so they can feel more comfortable or something. But, there's not...like to go someplace you have to go out of (town). I mean, when you want to go do something.

The teens in this study recognize that school activities are the main source of activity and that travel out of town is not always possible, as expressed by this 10th-grade female:

> I: Are there other things in the community to do?
> P: Um, not really. School is the main thing around here for the kids because they don't...there was going to be a McDonald's but the community didn't want that. And like there's no hang-out for kids really. I mean, there's a pizza shop but no one ever hangs out there. It's a big school, everything is centered around the school and after-school activities and everybody is into sports most likely because it's the only other thing to do unless you go somewhere else, which is hard if you don't have your license.

One of the most striking themes to emerge from this study is the participants' unanimous perception that there is nothing to do in their town/community. Every participant commented that there was not much to do and no place for teens to go to be together (with the exception of structured and supervised school events). The effects of these rural adolescents' perception of having nothing to do in their community range from positive feelings of being able to commune with nature and developing a comfort level, even affinity, for being alone to negative feelings of "I

have no friends" and a need to escape from the community. A 9th-grade male had ambivalent feelings about his isolation:

> I: What is it like growing up in (town)?
> P: I live just on the other side, over near (next rural town). There is nobody my age around there who are guys.
> I: What do you like about living here?
> P: Just being with my friends.
> I: Has it had any bad influence on you?
> P: Well, sometimes it's hard to deal with certain people and stuff because we don't have, like in a big town you got all sorts of different people. But I haven't really had anybody down around there. There's no drug problem or anything. I've never been subject to that yet.
> I: Can you think of what influence it might have on your future?
> P: Well, it's helped me so that I can, I mean like I want to be an architect and stuff and get into stuff I can do by myself, so it's like, so just being in where I'm always alone and stuff, I kind of like being alone so that's what my work field will be.

These rural communities are geographically spread and sparsely populated outside of their small towns. Often neighbors are a couple of miles apart. School districts sometimes cut across county lines so that even phone communication with schoolmates involves making long distance telephone calls. An 11th-grade female describes her separation from her peers:

> I: How I want to start off is for you to tell me what it is like living in (town).
> P: Well, I don't live in (town) I live out in _____. My address is (town) but I live out where none of my friends are. And it is long distance from (town) so I don't talk to any of my friends or anything. If I want to do anything it is probably about a seven mile drive. I like living out there though because it is different. It is pretty secluded, seven acres and a half.
> I: How is it different from where your friends live?
> P: I guess being separated from them, at least they have a few neighbors and kids their own age and where I live I only have just my brother. He's 21 so... Only that, I guess, it's just the

difference in being secluded.

Transportation just within the community can be a problem for some adolescents, especially those younger than 16. Participants report that getting rides with parents is generally not a problem, only a pain. The farther away from town or each other, however, the more transportation becomes a deciding factor on how often these adolescents get to see each other outside of school, even with parents willing to transport them. And, in upstate New York the weather in the winter (a long 3-4 months) becomes another factor. An 11th-grade male describes the difference getting his license has made on his social life:

> I: What's that like? Farther out is hard for you to get to school and stuff?
> P: Not really. This year I'm driving, so...
> I: Well, that's nice.
> P: But, um, like when I was younger I didn't have any friends.
> I: Uhuh. And what's it like now?
> P: It's better since I've been able to drive. Cause you can do pretty much anything you want.

Every community in this study has a bowling alley and a pizza restaurant in town. None has a movie theater, teen center, or mall (not even a mini-shopping place); all have a grocery store. Most youth go to school, and then stay for structured activities, go to work or go home -- their own or a friend's. An 11th-grade female's response to the question of what she does not like about her town is typical:

> I: Anything (about the town) you don't like?
> P: Just to have like a teen club. So that teens aren't so confined to their house or the school. They have places like, um... You have to be under a certain age, if it was just the teens and it had like rec. rooms and, um, it had dances once in a while. Up to (large metropolitan area) I went to visit my cousin and she took me there and it was really neat. It had, um...it was a full length

> bar and there's all kinds of sodas and potato chips and everything and there's nothing like that, even closely resembles that in (own town). So...someplace for the teens to hang out after school.
> I: Aha...so, normally after school you just kind of go home and stuff like that?
> P: I used to but I mean, the other choice is to get a job. So I went out and got a job. And I work Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. At, um, an elderly care home. So...I mean, on the days that I have off, I, that's what I do, I just go home and I'm home for the rest of the night.

More time is spent with family at home (especially during the week) or in the company of family members when they go out -- oftentimes trips to neighboring cities happen on the weekends when the adolescents bring along a friend to go to the mall when their whole family is going. Some teens, mostly those who live in town, hang out on the main street or at the pizza shop or the bowling alley. Others go to the pizza place or bowling alley with family or friends later in the evenings or on the weekends. But as one 11th-grade female states, that can get to be boring really fast:

> There's the pizza place and when that first came everyone was like, "Oh great, yeah!" And that was the hangout, but now everyone's like "I don't want to go over there, I've been there already."

Even those adolescents who live in the town are isolated from their friends who live out of town. Getting a driver's license and having access to a car so greatly enhances a rural teen's freedom that most covet it (even to the point that the risk of losing it is more important than anything else and keeps some teens from drinking and driving). When asked about anything that might have changed between her first and second interview, an 11th-grade female replied:

> Well, my car, because by me getting a car (it) has made it alot easier for my friends and I to go places. And then, one of my other friends got a car. So now we have two cars that everybody can get in and just get out of (town) and go and have a good time.

With a license, or with a friend with a license, these rural adolescents can go places without adults, sometimes for the first time in their lives. School activities are no longer their sole options for leisure and time spent with families decreases. Finally, rural adolescents have a chance to engage in informal group activities with peers but it is still most often done in neighboring cities. As can be expected, the more rural the community, the less frequently travelling was done, regardless of whether the parents or students were doing the driving. Says an 11th grade male from the most rural community who has a car:

> Usually it's (going out of town) Friday nights and weekends and all.

The role of school activities in the community. The schools in these rural communities are the focal point for youth activity. Extracurricular sports and academic clubs, as well as part-time employment, account for the majority of adolescent activity in this study. All schools have county chapters of FFA (Future Farmers of America) and FHA (Future Homemakers of America). One school, in cooperation with the community, has a job shadowing program in place for its adolescents. The communities appear to support sports, particularly male sports, and many students, parents and other adults attend games. Students who live and work on farms (Esterman and Hedlund, 1994) and other adolescents with conflicting work schedules are visibly absent from sports and other after school activities.

There are also those who prefer not to be involved, but not many. One of the advantages to being involved in extracurricular activities is the opportunity for traveling and for meeting people outside of the community. Rural adolescents who participate in sports are exposed to people from other (usually also rural) communities. Academic clubs offer a select few the chance to travel nationally and even internationally, providing brief glimpses for comparison of the adolescent's rural community with the rest of the world and its diversity of peoples. The lack of exposure to multiculturalism for most rural adolescents is noted in the work of Vollmer and Hedlund (1994), where they explore rural adolescents' perceptions of being inadequately informed and socialized for exposure to a larger, more diverse world beyond their own community.

Most of the participants in this study recognize the school (as well as the family, which we will not address in this paper) as a place that is not democratic or just. Adolescents feel they have little power when it comes to policy making or changing. A 12th-grade male expresses his lack of faith in the students' ability to make a difference:

> I: Do you guys feel like you have a lot of influence on what happens here?
> P: No.
> I: No say whatsoever?
> P: We have student council which does nothing.
> I: Really? Like, say, you wanted to make a guys soccer team, do you think you...?
> P: We've tried that twice and the first time nobody showed up to practice -- when nobody was told when the practice was. The second time we had thirty guys sign up including most of the football team. We couldn't get a coach.

> I: So you really don't have any power over what goes on?
> P: Right. If we put up a big enough, you know, a lot of people wanted to play track next... Last year, including myself, and we bitched enough to get it, where they hauled us over to (another town) and they let us be on their track team.
> I: So if there's something you really want to do, sometime..
> P: They will, you know, if they won't start it here, they'll haul you somewhere else is what they'll do.

And later in the same interview:

> I: What's going on with the that (the school budget)?
> S: Well, this is our third year on austerity and it's just...if we don't get off of austerity, there will be no sports. There will be no after school activities at all.
> I: Not at all?
> S: You know, there might be a dance here and there, but that will all have to be funded by the organization.
> I: Um-hmm. How do you think it's affecting everybody here?
> S: Nobody, well, my class, we don't really care because we're gone. But the other people, I feel bad for them. Because there's a lot of people that I do hang out with, girls mostly, that do play sports and these sports are their life in this school and without them it'll just be like, "Big deal! Why should I be here?"

The adolescents in this study perceive leisure activities with peers as a vehicle for exploring identity and retaining some control over structuring their own lives. A female, first-year high school graduate, provides us with an excellent example of some of these rural adolescents trying to gain some control over their lives:

> I: Let's talk about the school a little bit, your memories of the school.
> P: OK. It sucks to put it very blatantly. It sucks. They have so many rules that you have to follow, but really the way that they handle them is wrong. They put you in detention for things you did wrong, which is where most of those kids want to be because they don't want to go home or they have nothing else to do with their time, so that's what they want. I have friends, some friends that used to go to detention all the time. I ask them why, and they say, "I don't want to go home, I don't

> like my home life." And, instead of putting them in detention, they should have after-school activities which...sports. Well a lot of the kids are into sports, but they have nothing else for them really. They have some clubs, but the kids aren't into some of the clubs. A lot of the kids I hung out with last year were skateboarders - now that is illegal in (town). You do not skateboard in (town). If you get caught, your parents usually get called by the police. Yes, I know, I used to skateboard in (town), I know all these things, they never called my parents because I was 18, but, they've called my friends' parents like, "Come pick up so-and-so, they're skateboarding in town and you're not supposed to be doing that." It's like, this is their activity, it's just like some kids throwing a football around on the football field. If they're doing it where you're not going to get hurt and you're not endangering anyone else, I don't see what the problem is, but, it's how they feel.
> I: So the school authorities call the parents?
> P: The school, the town, it's all of them together. Neighbors, if someone saw you skating on the sidewalk, "Did you know your son or daughter's out here skateboarding down the road?" Like, who cares, it's what they want to do.

Fine, Mortimer and Roberts (1990) point out that a sense of place is as significant as the activity itself in creating a sense of community for adolescents; they need to have a place of their own, a "territory", that recognizes their group as meaningful -- a place where their public symbols of youth culture (inextricable from class culture and gender culture) and experiences have shared meanings. When asked what he would change about his (most rural) community, a 10th-grade male replied:

> "I'd make it bigger, like more people, more activities, and... If they could have, if they could put in something like a 'Y' down here, you know a place where kids could go after school and do things, that would be, I'd like that. Lots of kids would like that."

Outside of school, churches seem to provide the only formal gathering places with activities for *groups* of teens and these too provide only institutionalized peer groups. Some participants were involved in church groups, but, as a rule, these groups did not appear to be a potent social force in the adolescent culture. One female, first-year high school graduate, had gone to church to be with her friend but discontinued going after her friend went off to college:

> I: Do you participate in youth groups or church or anything like that?
> P: No. No, because I used to go to church with my friend. And that used to be like our Sunday day, we'd spend the day together. We'd go to church and we'd go to youth group and like that. And since she's gone away to school, I haven't gone, because it was her church, it wasn't like the church that I belong to, and I guess church was just a thing I went to with her. It was like our time together, and now that she's like gone away to school, I don't go anymore. Not really, I don't do anything with the community.

After being probed, a 10th-grade female remembers her church youth group but school activities take precedence:

> I: Do you have any other activities, either in school or with the community?
> P: No.
> I: Do you know of any, that other people do?
> P: I don't think there is anything else.
> I: Um huh, so you can't really think of anything kids really do. What about like a youth group with church and stuff?
> P: Oh yeah. My sister and I and my brothers, it's not the same one but we all go to the same church, just different groups. We have Bible Clubs every Friday night. I didn't go to it last time, but...
> I: What church do you go to?
> P: _____
> I: What kind of church is it?
> P: It's Christian. It's a really good church. And I like the

> Pastor there. He's great!
> I: With your Youth Group, what do you do?
> P: I haven't been there. So it's the first time that I...I'm supposed to go Friday night. We read the Bible and talk about it, have refreshments and it's really fun. I didn't go last week, because we had a basketball game and I was selling tickets.

A few participants, mostly farm-raised children, are involved in 4-H activities. These are mostly farm-raised children. Similarly, a few male participants are still involved in scouting activity, although in adolescence they have outgrown most activities that are offered.

Nonformal activities. Every participant had a description of "hanging out" with friends, either in town or at one another's homes to talk, watch videos, listen to music, or play games. Apparently, one of the nonformal group activities almost always available are parties that one could ride around and find (if you knew where to look). Alcohol and music are the main activity at most of these parties. Each town has its secluded party spots and there are also parties at people's houses; sometimes parents were home, but most often not. Many of the adolescents in this sample said they did not drink at parties. All schools in this study had active chapters of SADD (Students Against Drunk Driving) and one of the participants in this study had attended AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings with his first year of sobriety at age 14. For those who do choose to party with alcohol, this 10th-grade male describes a typical party:

> I: What other issues do the kids, do you, have over the school? How about drugs and alcohol, is there a lot of that?
> S: It's not really talked about. I mean, the drug use, a lot of people,

you know, smoke a little grass on the side or something like that. There's a lot of beer. You know, and a lot of kids - most of the guys drink beer, and most of the girls drink like vodka and things like that. And then, there's the self-righteous people, like the Jesus freaks. I'm very opposed to them (laughter), who get all upset and say, "You know, you shouldn't do that, that's immoral," and stuff like that, and the promiscuity and things like that. And then there's the rest of us who just sort of sit back and kick back and relax and who cares? I mean you, there's...you can usually find a party on a Friday night any time of the year.
I: Somewhere in one of these communities something is going on? Somebody's house?
S: Somewhere around, usually, well, now that it's springtime again, getting towards state land. A couple of weeks, and, well, down towards, starting about June 1st, the parties start every night. And, June 1st all the way until past graduation, until school begins the next year. Every single night there's a party somewhere on state land, whether it's up here, up there, wherever, there's always one you can find. And if you know who to talk to, you can always find how to get in or anything like that. And,...they get busted. They used to party last year up at a place called _____ up in (neighboring rural town). Now, in my opinion, it was the worst place in the world that you could party because of the fact that it's four miles up on a hill and a dead-end road.
I: No place to escape?
S: There's no place to escape. The road is one lane, one side is a wall, and the other side is a cliff. And not only is it stupid because of a lot of drunk jocks trying to drive down this thing. I can't figure how they make it down. But the cops went up there a bunch this summer. And there's just no place to go. If you have a 4-wheel drive you can take it down through a farmer's field and make it back to (main road) that way or down to (other main road), but most people were up there with their cars and stuff and they just got busted, hauled down to the station. Parents had to come pay $50, and, or they just got citations, you know $50 citation, whatever, and they get let off, and they have to come up with the $50 for possession of alcohol and stuff like that.
I: What, other than drinking and doing drugs, what do they do? Do they dance? Play drinking games?
S: Where, at parties?
I: Yeah.
I: Stand around and talk.
S: Ok. It depends on what happens at the party. I mean, sometimes,

> you get... I remember I was up (place) last year and there was a football player we had there and a skater. And the skater was smaller than I am, and the football player was twice my size, and the two of them were wrestling. And basically, that's what happens. I mean, people will do what they feel like doing. It's just that they're in a big... They, they do what they normally do except they're in a crowd. It's just like one person or whatever, or two people, or five people sitting around - it's 30 or 60 or something like that, you know. Sittin around drinking beer or whatever. But it's not that much different. Somebody's got a radio playing and stuff like that, but you can't. Sometimes they play it real loud, but I guess sometimes they don't. You don't really think about it.

Noticeably lacking in the participants' perceptions of their lives was a public place for groups of teens to go to socialize informally, other than the local pizza place or bowling alley. The parties to which the former student refer provide a place and a way for groups of rural adolescents to gather informally.

Many participants talked of needing a place to go to get to know members of the opposite sex and to take a date. Those participants who were dating noted the need for places where couples could join others in leisure rather than having to forsake same-sex relationships to spend time with each other (usually at each other's houses). Fine, Mortimer and Roberts (1990) discuss the importance of leisure in socializing cross-gender relations. In semipublic situations the presence of peers "puts a brake on excess intimacy and provides a moderately painless way for individuals to become sensitive to one another's feelings" (pg. 230).

Solitary Activities. Almost every adolescent described their typical day ending with "going home, spending time with or avoiding family, doing homework, watching TV and/or listening to music and going to bed." Doing

homework was something that all rural adolescents professed to do mostly on a daily basis. As one 9th-grade male student put it:

> It's so boring that for the lack of something better to do I do my homework.

And a 10th-grade female reported:

> I do history homework all the time, even when it's not assigned. I like history.

The times spent in each activity varied widely.

Several patterns of solitary activities were obvious because of the frequency of response. First, 96% of all adolescents in this study answered that one of their pasttimes was to take a walk outside. Most viewed a walk as a solitary activity to relax and think, although some took walks with friends, family members or pets. Many of whom answered that they enjoyed taking walks did so only after being probed ("What do you do when you're alone?" or "What if you do have spare time?"). Although they clearly valued taking a walk, they offered it as an example of a leisure activity almost as an afterthought, as if that option were a given. Even those participants who carried heavy academic loads and/or were involved in so many activities that their schedules seemed impossible could find the time to take a walk. This 10th-grade female farm adolescent's busy schedule did allow for a walk, and, incidentally, she felt that she didn't have "very much involvement in the school social life because a lot of other people are down at the school every night for sports", but she preferred having others things that she liked to do at home "with the farm and stuff."

I: You said you were involved with track here. What other kinds of activities are you involved with?
P: I'm in honor society, Spanish club, secretary for the Student Council, FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America) Dollars for Scholars.
I: Describe for me a typical school night.
P: Um, well lately it's been I get out of school. I go to track practice. Come home at...I get out about 10 after 5. Then I go to the barn and get my hay and feed the cows. And then I come up, go up to the house. It's just like across the road from the barn. Start my homework. Eat supper. Do more of my homework, then go to bed.
I: What kinds of things do you do in your spare time?
P: Talk with my friends, listen to all kinds of music. I like western stories and Indians, but I'm getting more into like classics...I just don't like them.
I: What's your typical weekend like?
P: Watching T.V., *going for walks*, working on the farm.

It is our impression that the frequency of this pasttime is due to the ruralness since most talked of loving to be in the woods, seeing animals, watching water flow, and feeling a sense of peace. The intensity with which these rural adolescents spoke of nature and its importance in their lives was directly dependent on their community's and their own degree of ruralness. Farm-raised childrens' love and appreciation of nature, especially animals, was most obviously in the foreground when they spoke of their values (see also Esterman and Hedlund, 1994).

Secondly, 79% of participants either wrote (poetry, stories, letters, etc.) or read (novels - science fiction, biographies, autobiographies, magazines). And many (percentage not calculated) did artwork - drawing, painting, etc. Many other solitary pasttimes of these rural adolescents seem to be creative as well. Some dance, play more than one musical instrument, train horses, "play" with computers (one who writes computer programs), build and rebuild engines and machines, or work with

wood. One was a costume designer, and one an aspiring cartoonist (because she likes to both write and draw).

With the exception of the musicians and dancers who perform publically and the animal trainers who go to shows, basically no one shares their creative works with anyone else - they do these things for pure enjoyment and are oblivious of each others' accomplishments. Some even prefix their response with "Well, no one knows this..." or "My friends would die if they knew, but..." or "I just do it for myself...".

And, finally, quite a few adolescents in this study were very active in what we term solitary pursuits because they are not primarily peer-oriented activities. For example, many do volunteer work in their communities, often with younger children either in sports they are also involved with or in youth programs in which they are no longer eligible to participate (many teenagers in this study lamented the fact that there were youth programs in their communities for younger children that they had enjoyed and now missed being able to do). These rural adolescents volunteer in the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, 4-H and Cooperative Extension, Habitat for Humanity, local nursing homes and hospitals, the local volunteer fire companies and ambulance squads (sometimes as qualified first-responders) and the local library. Some also teach Sunday School in their church, teach in local after school or summer youth programs, or coach sports. In the schools, rural adolescents in this study were active in suicide prevention, alcohol awareness and drug prevention groups.

Clearly, these rural adolescents do have things to do and most are quite constructively active in both in-school activities and out-of-school activities. Our interpretation of their impression that there is "nothing to do" is that it stems from the lack of opportunity for nonformal group activity outside of school-sponsored events.

Potential hazards for adolescent socialization and development through leisure.

Adolescents are not concerned about the socialization function of their leisure activities. They do things together because they are fun (Fine, Mortimer and Roberts, 1990). While the adolescents in this study confirmed this commonsense observation, they also recognized a need that is not being met for them. They do not have ample opportunity in their own community to congregate or "hang out" with their peers to engage in activities of their own choosing without the unequal power relationships that are inherent in structured school activities. They even recognize this as the reason for needing to go out of the community to a place where they can have fun in the company of their peers. A 12th-grade male explains:

> I: How come you go all the way to (neighboring city with large college) to play basketball when you can play basketball in the gym at school?
> P: We like (gym on college campus). And we just like (neighboring city). We go over there a lot...just to drive around. Once you are in (home town) on the weekend you'll find it is pretty boring. So you got to do something.
> I: So where do you hang out in (neighboring city)?
> P: We usually go down to (college town) or over to the movies. We go to (gym on college campus) to play basketball and we go to the games over at (college field house) and some hockey games. Just about everywhere.

We think the effects of rural teenagers' perceptions of being isolated, of having nothing to do in their communities may very well affect the socialization and developmental benefits of leisure activity. Dyadic and clique relationships abound in rural adolescent culture but there is a glaring absence of large group interactions. These rural communities have few places or opportunities for nonformal peer group interactions. The amounts of time that rural adolescents seem to be spending with groups of peers both with and without adult presence may be disproportionate in the settings and interpersonal contexts of home, school and community than has been reported in the literature (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984). The rural school and its activities (sports, academic clubs, student government, etc.) appear to be nearly the sole choice for group leisure for the participants in this study and they seem to be the focal point for rural community spirit. Rural adolescents are geographically isolated from their peers and so appear to spend larger amounts of time at home with family and/or alone until late adolescence when they can drive to neighboring cities at least occasionally. This may partially account for reports that rural youth are typically more parent oriented than peer oriented (Floyd & South, 1972). However, at about the same time of acquiring a driver's license, adolescents often also obtain part-time employment and/or begin steady dating; both activities decrease their available time to spend with peers in leisure activity while increasing exposure to the outside world where social skills are required. It is our feeling that rural adolescents need more autonomous opportunities to learn cooperation and trust in supportive informal

peer group interactions before entering the adult social world of work. At a time when these youth are wanting to exercise their growing independence and decrease parental and adult influence in their lives, they need a time and place where choice, cooperation, and conflict-resolution between themselves and adults is possible. Since home and school, almost by definition, do not provide such opportunity, it becomes very important for adolescents to seek alternative informal sources. While schools may give service to the importance of group dynamics for development by including social skills in their curricula, these rural youth have little opportunity to experience or practice the cause and effect of them on their peers.

We would like to see attempts to gather socially through parties involving alcohol replaced with more constructive, safe and acceptable activities that could be structured by the adolescents themselves but supported and supervised by parents, educators and community members. The perceived lack of informal opportunities for social interaction may affect these rural adolescents' sense of belonging, sense of identity and confidence in their ability to negotiate both same- and cross-gender relations.

When asked what they would change about their community, answers consisted of bringing the malls, movie theaters and dance centers of the neighboring cities to their own town, even though, in some cases, they know it has been tried before and has failed. It appears to us that these rural adolescents are, for the most part, not envious of their city counterparts. They recognize the safety, security and friendliness of their small towns and do not see neighboring cities (or their schools)

as "the place to be." Vollmer and Hedlund (1994) report a strengthening in and appreciation of the "country" values of rural adolescents after exposure to the outside world.

Closing thoughts

We have addressed some of the recent methodological concerns about adolescent research in general and adolescent leisure research specifically. Feldman and Elliott (1990) note the absence of the adolescent voice from previous psychosocial research. In Fine, Mortimer and Roberts' (1990) review of the existing adolescent leisure literature they point out the need for investigation of what adolescents do when they are not in formal educational or family settings. This is underscored by Feldman and Elliott's editorial note that identifies the particular failure in the existing research literature to "explore how teenagers spend their leisure time, whether with others or alone" (pg. 91). We have given adolescents from four rural New York State schools a voice in attempting to determine their perceptions of what leisure pursuits are available to them in their community away from school and family and to document exactly how and with whom they spend their leisure time.

Themes arising from a content analysis of the interviews themselves include participants' perceptions of a lack of community activities, a sense of aloneness and isolation from peers, and a feeling that extracurricular activities at school (especially sports) are the major source of entertainment for both students and adults in the community -- a sort of tie that binds the community and gives it a sense of unity

and spirit. While the rural adolescents in this study valued their small town, found it to be a friendly if somewhat gossipy place to grow up, and felt sheltered and safe in it (Hedlund, 1993), they also found it to be boring. They perceive that there is nothing to do in their communities except school activities. Rural adolescents travel to neighboring cities to go to malls, attend movies or have something to do when they are with friends, although transportation constraints, school night restrictions, and inclement weather all contribute to limit the frequency with which they can travel.

Participation is heavy in extracurricular activities at school. Students in rural high schools have ample opportunities to participate in multiple sports, academic clubs and student government. The high degree of involvement in activities by our study lends strong support to Melton's (1983) compelling argument for the value of small rural schools as opposed to larger, consolidated schools. Melton draws on the line of research associated with "manning theory" (Barker & Gump, 1964) which shows the beneficial effects on increased participation, versus spectating, in smaller institutions which are not "over-manned." Family involvement in the lives of rural adolescents extends beyond the age when it would usually shift more to the peer group. Parents are needed for transportation to school activities, friend's houses and neighboring cities.

Rural adolescent solitary leisure activities tend to be either highly creative forms of self expression (writing, drawing, theater, dance, building machines or woodwork), involvement with the mass media of television, radio and video, or

communing with nature (walks, hikes, jogging, hunting, fishing). Most of the participants spent a fair amount of time (1/2 to 3-4 hours per night) on homework. It is our impression from this study that rural adolescents spend a lot of time alone because of rural travel constraints but also to serve a need for independence from parents when at home. Many participants told of being in their rooms for much of school evenings, enjoying doing what they wanted to do and enjoying the alone time.

Many of the adolescents in this study *give* a great deal to their communities in the form of volunteer activities and most of them also engage in highly creative and talented solitary, free-time leisure pursuits. The emergence of these last two themes are interesting because the participants in this study mostly do not recognize these activities as being much more than "giving them something to do" or "it's just something that I enjoy." In turn, it is the adolescents' lack of attaching significance or importance to their volunteer and solitary activities that prevents community acknowledgment of their contributions as a group. It is our impression that almost no one, adult or adolescent, in these communities has either a complete or accurate picture of what a valuable resource they have in their teen youth.

It is our hope that this study could emphasize the value of leisure activities to educational and occupational achievement and enable more effective educational and community support for rural adolescent leisure activities. We feel that the central role played by the school and its activities for both the adolescent and the community needs to be considered when school budgets are being negotiated and/or

consolidation is being discussed. There are desirable benefits of being more isolated from peers, for example, creative solitary leisure pursuits, time to complete homework, increased time spent with family, and time for communing with nature.

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