

Youth Organizing as a Developmental Context for African American and Latino Adolescents

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ABSTRACT—*Research on adolescence has begun to recognize the centrality of ecological context in human development. Ecological approaches, however, need to pay greater attention to the political context of young people's lives, both in terms of how youth interpret their sociopolitical world and how they participate in changing it. Research on youth organizing among African American and Latino youth offers insights about these dimensions of sociopolitical development. Youth organizing enables young people growing up in difficult circumstances to identify the social origins of problems and take action to address those problems. Emerging research suggests that youth organizing has the potential to contribute to youth development, community development, and broader social movements. Youth organizing challenges social constructions of adolescents as apathetic or self-involved and offers an alternative to deficit-based orientations toward youth of color.*

KEYWORDS—youth organizing; civic engagement; race and ethnicity; ecological context; youth programs; activism

Research on adolescence has made progress by recognizing the centrality of ecological context and diversity in human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner & Steinberg, 2005; Rogoff, 2003). Ecological approaches strive to avoid deficit-based assumptions about youth from nondominant cultural groups and have begun to examine how developmental pathways for youth of color are influenced by social stratification and oppression (García Coll et al., 1996; Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003).

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We argue, however, that developmental scientists have not paid sufficient attention to the political context of development for African American and Latino adolescents. By political context, we refer to ways that young people experience policies in their schools and communities and how they participate in solving problems as political actors (Youniss & Hart, 2005). To understand more about this sociopolitical domain, we examine emerging research about youth organizing among youth of color. Organizing enables young people growing up in working-class and poor communities to identify the social origins of problems and take action to address those problems (Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe, 2008; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Youth organizing offers an alternative to deficit-based perspectives toward youth of color (Ginwright, 2010). In this article, after explaining our theoretical framework, we critically assess the existing literature to articulate what is known and not known about individual, community, and societal impacts of youth organizing. We conclude with suggestions for future research directions.

YOUTH ORGANIZING: WHAT IS IT?

Youth organizing is a form of civic engagement in which young people identify common interests, mobilize their peers, and work collectively to address quality-of-life and human rights issues in their schools and communities. Contemporary youth organizing has its historical roots in the Civil Rights Movement, when African American college students organized lunch-counter sit-ins and Mexican American high schoolers organized walkouts in Los Angeles (Carson, 1981; Rosales, 1997). Youth organizing gained renewed momentum in the 1990s. This reflected a broader societal push for greater youth community engagement (Youniss et al., 2002) but was fueled in particular by dissatisfaction in communities of color with quality-of-life issues such as safety, education, and policing (James & McGillicuddy, 2001). Today organizing groups, working with low-income youth of color and other marginalized groups, address a range of issues. A report by the Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing identified 160

groups primarily focused on education reform, followed by racial justice, environmental justice, the economy, juvenile justice, immigration rights, health, and issues related to girls and young women (Torres-Fleming, Valdes, & Pillai, 2010). Groups tend to work with adolescents between the ages of 14 and 20; they typically include youth of a range of ages and grade levels (Kirshner, 2008). Although some organizations may recruit college students as staff or support, the target population of organizing groups is typically high school age.

Youth organizing represents one type of civic engagement among a constellation of civic opportunities, such as community service or participation on youth councils (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007). Youth organizing groups can be characterized by three shared features. First, their campaigns are guided by social justice values aimed at developing power to change systems, institutions, or policies (Larson & Hansen, 2005; Warren et al., 2008). This is distinct from versions of community service that engage youth in charity (Countryman & Sullivan, 1993). Second, organizing groups are often led by young people who focus on youth's concerns and mobilize young people as agents of change (Delgado & Staples, 2007; Ginwright & James, 2002). Third, groups are often formed on the basis of shared social identities linked to experiences of discrimination or marginalization (HoSang, 2006).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Youth organizing groups pursue goals at multiple levels: promoting individual members' civic and personal development, building social and political capital in local communities, and strengthening connections to broader social justice movements. To add to the complexity, these levels are interconnected: Personal feelings of efficacy and engagement, for example, are likely to increase when one participates in a broader social movement, such as occurred among Freedom Riders in the Civil Rights Movement (McAdam, 1988). We propose, therefore, that research about the impacts of youth organizing should attend to three interrelated levels of change: individual, community, and society. This effort to conceptualize multiple levels of change is consistent with interdisciplinary scholarship on youth organizing (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

To conceptualize how youth organizing contributes to *individual development*, we draw on political social identity theory, which asserts that a sense of collective identity is necessary for group members to engage in collective action (Sturmer & Simon, 2009). The extent to which individuals see themselves as group members depends on a group's history, social experiences, and relative dominance in society (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). By participating in social action groups, youth learn to address community and social problems that they view as unfair. These civic activities might include protests, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience (Kennelly, 2009). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe this form of civic engagement as "the justice-oriented

citizen who emphasizes collective work towards community betterment while maintaining a more critical stance on social, political, and economic issues" (p. 21). It has been well documented that urban youth of color are motivated to engage in these forms of civic activism (Cohen et al., 2006; Ginwright, 2007; Marcelo Barrios, Hugo Lopez, & Hoban Kirby, 2007).

With respect to *community development*, which refers to the process of strengthening social capital through organizing, we draw on Putnam's (1993) definition of social capital as "features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 36). Youth organizing contributes to political networks and norms that serve as social resources for community improvement (Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999). This view of social capital acknowledges structural constraints in communities, and views youth as active participants facilitating institutional change through strong social networks.

Concerning *societal development*, which refers to those features of civic engagement that contribute to a vibrant democracy, we propose that youth organizing supports the development of a healthy and robust democracy when young people, particularly those who are too often disengaged from politics, become engaged in the democratic process and various forms of collective action (Carson, 1981). Of the three levels of change, this one is the most challenging to study—but we include it because it captures an important element of the long-term social movement goals of youth organizing.

EMERGING EVIDENCE ABOUT THE IMPACTS OF YOUTH ORGANIZING

Emerging research about youth organizing in the United States is often published in foundation reports, nonrefereed articles, and invited book chapters rather than in refereed journals. For example, in winter 2011, we searched three social sciences databases (ERIC, PsychInfo, and Social Sciences Full Text) using two search terms, "youth organizing" and "youth activism," bounded between 1995 and 2011. These searches identified nine peer-reviewed studies. Ethnographic and case-study accounts were common because youth activism is an emerging domain of research, in which open-ended, exploratory inquiry is appropriate (Larson & Hansen, 2005). Because there are a relatively small number of peer-reviewed studies, for this article we also report findings from books, book chapters, white papers, and evaluation reports. The majority of studies we found focused on individual development, which explains why that section is the most extensive of the three.

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

Civic Development

Studies of youth organizing—and closely related activities that emphasize political empowerment and participatory action

research—provide evidence that youth participants experience growth in three developmental domains: civic development, psychosocial wellness, and academic engagement. Of these, evidence about civic development is the strongest, with particular emphasis on participants' growing sense of agency and capacity to accomplish complex political campaign goals. Larson and Hansen (2005), for example, drawing on interviews and observations, analyzed developmental opportunities that emerged as students worked to change policies in the Chicago Public Schools. They found that youth organizers' sustained efforts contributed to the development of strategic thinking, including how to navigate bureaucratic systems, frame messages with policy makers, and respond to unexpected contingencies. Kirshner (2009) used ethnographic methods to study African American and Asian American youth organizers' effort to improve student leadership opportunities in local high schools. Kirshner reported evidence that the campaign provided a venue for organizers to form a civic identity defined by connection to community, group solidarity, and a sense of collective agency. Christens and Dolan (2011), relying on interviews and document analysis of a campaign to address root causes of youth violence, reported a process of psychological empowerment in which youth organizers expressed confidence that they were prepared to take on leadership roles and work with a group to make community-level change.

Multisite evaluations of two youth organizing initiatives, whose respondents were mostly African American and Latino, also provide evidence of a link between organizing and civic development (Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, & Laco, 2004; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2008). Gambone et al. (2004) combined surveys with qualitative observations in order to compare developmental supports and opportunities for young people in three types of youth programs: youth organizing, identity support (i.e., groups focused on psychological support for youth with shared social identities), and traditional youth development. In their statistical analysis, the authors found that youth organizers reported significantly higher levels of opportunities for decision making and leadership than did the other two groups. Also, those involved in organizing and identity support reported significantly higher levels of civic efficacy than did the respondents from traditional youth agencies. One limitation of this nonexperimental study was that the samples were not random and there was some variation in the demographic composition of each group.

Mediratta et al.'s (2008) evaluation of eight community organizing groups focused on the frequency of civic behaviors and future intentions to be civically active. They found that youth members reported higher civic and political engagement on surveys than did a comparative national sample, as measured by participating in protests, contacting public officials, working on community problems, and planning to be civically engaged in the future. These authors also reported that participants reported high levels of future intentions to participate: More than 90% said that they were "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to stay

involved in activism and to learn more about politics in the future.

Although findings about civic development are suggestive, they are based on a small number of studies that only begin to address explanatory processes. For example, because groups are typically based on voluntary membership, it could be that the key drivers of development have to do with their small size, the personalities of adult leaders, or the fact that participants self-select into them.

Psychological Wellness

In addition to attention to civic engagement outcomes, community psychologists argue that there is a connection between political activism and psychological wellness (Prilleltensky, 2003; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2002). Psychological wellness is a broad term that refers to a sense of hope, empowerment, and purpose in life (Prilleltensky, 2008). Researchers in this tradition theorize that building an awareness of justice and inequality, combined with meaningful social action, contributes to greater well-being for youth who are growing up in an oppressive social context (Freire, 1970; Potts, 2003; Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Empirical studies that examine the relation between sociopolitical action and well-being provide some evidence for this connection. For example, Thomas, Davidson, and McAdoo (2008) developed an after-school intervention for African American girls that introduced them to Black history, notions of collectivism, critical perspectives on racism and oppression, and activism. Their quasi-experimental evaluation found that participation in the program contributed to higher levels of ethnic identity, awareness of racism, and intention to engage in activism. Also, Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009) surveyed undocumented Latino high school students and found that community engagement was associated with psychological resiliency. Qualitative research by Cammarota (2007) documents how Latino students who engaged in social activism developed a critical consciousness about historical inequities and the relevance of academic learning to their lives. More research is needed, however, to conceptualize and study the relation between youth organizing and broader indices of wellness and resiliency.

Academic Engagement

Emerging evidence shows a positive relation between activism and academic engagement. In qualitative, peer-reviewed research, Cammarota (2007) reports findings from a school-based social justice education project that aimed to empower youth to study and take action about issues affecting their lives. Students described a shift from being alienated from school toward seeing its relevance. For example, students reported learning how to use academic tools—such as ethnography or critical theory—to interpret and challenge discrimination or inequality. Students began to see academic content as a vehicle for them to accomplish socially relevant goals.

Mediratta et al.'s (2008) evaluation provides support for this claim as well. Youth organizers self-reported changes in their academic engagement, with 90% of the students indicating that their involvement in youth organizing made them more motivated to complete high school, 80% indicating that their grades improved, and 60% indicating that they took more challenging coursework due to their involvement in organizing. In an article based on this evaluation, Shah (2011) reported that the post-graduate ambitions of youth organizing participants exceeded those reported by a national sample of Latino and African American youth. Similar to other findings reported above, these findings are limited by their self-report nature and the prevalent finding that young people's academic aspirations do not always match their behavior.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Youth organizing groups aim to improve community institutions, such as schools, youth programs, and police departments, by mobilizing networks of youth and forming intergenerational ties with adult allies and policy makers. The most tangible consequences of these efforts are seen in institutional changes or new public policy. For example, a common target of organizing campaigns is public education (Mediratta et al., 2008; Torres-Fleming et al., 2010). Warren and Mapp (2010), for example, used interviews and archive analysis to document the efforts of an intergenerational group called *Padres y Jovenes Unidos* (PJU) to improve the quality of a chronically underperforming neighborhood school. The group's efforts contributed to a number of changes at the school, including the decision to redesign the school around a core set of college preparatory goals. Youth participated throughout this multiyear process by designing and administering surveys, participating in reform committees with teachers and community members, and holding press conferences. PJU's emphasis on academic preparation has been shared by organizing groups across the country that want to ensure that low-income students of color are prepared to succeed in college (Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Speer, 2008). In Los Angeles, youth organizing groups partnered with community organizations to successfully persuade the school district to make college-level classes the default expectation for all students (Renee, Welner, & Oakes, 2009).

In addition to focusing on schools as targets of local organizing, studies have documented efforts to change juvenile justice policies, promote interracial peace, and secure public funding for youth opportunities (Gordon, 2010; Kwon, 2006). Christens and Dolan (2011), for example, describe a multiyear campaign developed by Inland Congregations United for Change in Southern California to change city approaches to youth-violence prevention. The group argued successfully for a paid jobs program as well as other youth programs. In this study, as well as in Warren and Mapp's (2010) discussed above, a distinguishing element is the process of trust building that occurred as young

people forged intergenerational social capital with adult allies and policy makers. Data from these campaigns suggest that adult decision makers began to view youth in new ways and that young people gained confidence that they were being listened to.

IMPACT ON SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

With some exceptions, the past two decades have seen declines in young people's involvement in civil society, particularly among youth of color in urban neighborhoods (Levinson, 2007; Lopez et al., 2006). Youth of color from low-income families, especially those not on track to college, experience fewer opportunities for civic participation relative to their middle-class, college-bound peers (Hart & Atkins, 2002; Hyman & Levine, 2008; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009). Flanagan and Levine (2010) attribute disparities in voting and volunteering between college- and non-college-educated youth to "a lack of institutional opportunities for civic activities for young adults who do not attend college" (p. 165) linked to declines in union membership. This decline in civic engagement and corresponding gaps in electoral power pose a serious threat to a healthy and robust democracy (American Political Science Association, 2004).

Youth organizing, on the other hand, is a place where low-income youth of color build skills and connect to other groups pursuing allied causes. This form of civic engagement that aims to build a social movement continues to be one of the most significant features of social change and is necessary for the flourishing of democratic institutions. One needs only to study the 2008 presidential election, or the major political events in Egypt and Tunisia, to understand the possibility of youth organizing for social change.

The most compelling examples of the impact of youth organizing on societal change stems from research on the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (Carson, 1981; McAdam, 1988; Piven & Cloward, 1979; Rosales, 1997). This research documents the activities of young civil rights activists and the ways that their involvement contributed to awareness among the general public of racial inequality in the South (Carson, 1981). McAdam (1988) argues that understanding the dramatic social changes of the 1960s and 1970s (student movements, antiwar movements, women's movement, Black Power, free speech) requires a close examination of the youth organizing Freedom Summer campaigns during 1964.

More recently, youth organizing groups have been active in the national movement to reform immigration policies (Pallares & Flores-González, 2010). News descriptions of undocumented students telling their stories in community town halls, meeting with state legislators to promote tuition equity at public universities, and traveling to Washington, DC, are evidence of a social movement led by young people to pass the DREAM Act, which would create a path to citizenship for youth whose families brought them to the United States as minors (Gonzales, 2008).

Although the DREAM Act failed to pass the Senate in 2010, the durability of this movement is demonstrated by a subsequent redirection toward statewide campaigns related to immigration policy (Dobuzinskis, 2011).

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND THEORY

According to our three-level framework, youth organizing has the potential to contribute to individual youth development, improved schools and community institutions, and civic renewal in the broader society. But such claims are based on a small base of evidence that deserves further research. In particular, we recommend three directions for scholarship.

First, longitudinal research that examines the connection between organizing experiences in adolescence and later civic participation is needed. Few studies have had the resources to follow a sample of youth organizers, particularly in comparison to matched youth. Currently, many of the studies rely on measures of future intentions, such as intention to vote or be active in community politics, rather than examining people's behavior as they transition into adulthood. Such research could describe developmental processes of political engagement and age-related differences more precisely.

Second, research should look not just at individual trajectories but also at setting-level processes that promote sociopolitical development. One of the central premises of youth organizing, for example, is that sociopolitical empowerment involves an awareness of racism, inequality, and oppression (Cammarota, 2007; Watts et al., 2002). In this article, we described some evidence that youth organizers develop this critical awareness but further studies are required to describe what this process looks like in groups and conditions under which conversations about topics such as oppression lead to action rather than apathy. Research about setting-level processes is important because it has the potential to extend what the field knows about culturally responsive programming for Latino and African American youth (Bandy & Moore, 2011).

Third, we believe that research on youth organizing offers fertile ground for extending and deepening ecological theories of development, particularly as they relate to youth of color (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). Ecological perspectives have strengthened the field's understanding of how various levels of social context shape developmental paths for youth of color (Chao & Otsuki-Clutter, 2011; McBride Murry, Berkel, Gaylord-Harden, Copeland-Linder, & Nation, 2011). Also, youth-development scholars have emphasized human agency in navigating these ecological systems (Larson, 2011). What is needed is more work that integrates these two elements of an ecological systems approach—social context and human agency. Youth organizing, with its emphasis on channeling youth's awareness of inequality into social action, provides an especially valuable context for studying the bidirectional relations between ecological context and human development.

CONCLUSION

Given the vibrant role that young people played in earlier social movements for rights and equality, and the more fragmented state of youth-driven social movements today, attention to contemporary settings where youth are mobilizing is important. Knowledge of how social settings and political context influence development should aid in understanding the conditions under which youth of color either connect or disconnect from political life. Such research is important not just for promoting developmental outcomes for African American and Latino youth but for fostering broader community and societal rejuvenation.

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