Racial and political resistance: an examination of the sociopolitical action of racially marginalized youth

Nkemka Anyiwo[1], Gordon JM Palmer[2], Janay M Garrett[1], Jordan G Starck[3] and Elan C Hope[4]

This paper reviews recent literature on racially marginalized youth's sociopolitical action in the United States by highlighting three trends regarding the nature of, the factors shaping, and the implications of youth action. First, we trace the nature of racially marginalized youth's individual/interpersonal action, collective action, and digital action.

Then, we describe the sociopolitical, sociocultural, and contextual domains that shape their sociopolitical action. Importantly, we examine the significant implications for the mental health of youth, particularly as these actions have both positive and negative results. Finally, we highlight recent advances in the measurement of racially marginalized youth's sociopolitical action while imploring the field for more holistic and intersectional approaches to both measurement and theory.

Addresses

[1] University of Pennsylvania, Human Development and Quantitative Methods Division, Graduate School of Education, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, United States

[2] University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, Department of Psychology, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States

[3] Princeton University, Department of Psychology, Peretsman Scully Hall, Princeton, NJ 08540, United States

[4] North Carolina State University, Department of Psychology, 2310 Stinson Drive, Raleigh, NC 27695, United States

Corresponding author: Anyiwo, Nkemka (nanyiwo@upenn.edu)

Nations with a history of racial stratification, such as the United States, have enacted policies and practices that sustain white dominance and the marginality of non-white racial groups. However, racially marginalized youth's resistance has been instrumental in promoting societal change aimed toward dismantling this dominance. Given the emergence of new, nation-wide and racially marginalized youth-led movements (e.g. Black Lives Matter, the undocumented youth movement) in the United States, this paper reviews recent literature on racially marginalized adolescents and emerging adults in the U.S. context to examine three trends: 1) the nature of racially marginalized youth's sociopolitical action, 2) the factors that shape their actions, and 3) the implications of their actions on psychological development.

We conceptualize critical sociopolitical action as efforts to influence or transform communities and societal systems to be more equitable and just. Despite being disenfranchised from political systems, many racially marginalized people engage in activities traditionally associated with governance in western democracies (e.g., voting, running for office) as a mechanism for social change [1–4]. However, marginalized people also engage in communally accessible political actions including protest, boycotting, social media campaigns [1,3–7]. We include both 'traditional' and communally accessible forms of sociopolitical action in our brief review. The framing of these actions as forms of racial and political resistance is a particular reading of the critical civic engagement of racially marginalized youth who aim to transform a social fabric rife with inequalities [2,6,8].

Theories assessing the activism of marginalized youth are complex and emerging findings are limited and sometimes conflicting. Here, we provide a glimpse into these emerging findings specific to the U.S. context while acknowledging that more work needs to be done in order to resolve inconsistencies and bolster existing theoretical perspectives as the field moves forward.

Nature of sociopolitical action

Our review of the literature reveals three domains of racially marginalized youth's action that have been prominent in recent studies: 1) individual and interpersonal action, 2) collective action, and 3) digital action.

Youth's individual sociopolitical action can occur through conventional politics and community engagement such as writing letters to political officials about sociopolitical concerns, voting, giving opinions to media outlets, and volunteering [1,4,9]. Through interpersonal resistance, youth may reprimand friends, adults, or strangers who

make racist comments and defend those who are racially targeted [10[••],11,12]. Political engagement and resistance can also manifest in subtle, every day, and seemingly mundane strategies youth use to express themselves and survive [13] such as wearing clothing with cultural and political messages [14[••]], and academically persisting to contest social stereotypes [15,16,17[•],18].

Collectively, youth sociopolitical actions manifest across multiple domains including joining political parties and campaigning [4,19,20], organizing to address systemic inequity [2,5,21,22,23[••],24], and protesting (e. g., boycotting, blocking traffic, occupying buildings, marching) [4,6,19,25,26]. Organizing is a collective engagement practice that helps to bring together groups to advocate for resources and shape the policies and decisions made within social structures [2,23[••]]. Organizing provides an entree for youth to demand racially just institutional change from schools [27], a space that engenders the ability to work collaboratively with peers towards sociopolitical action [3,24], and a context to receive intergenerational care that helps to cultivate more activism [7,23[••]]. Protesting provides space for youth to assert their voices and advocate for social justice [4,19,25,26]. For example, racially marginalized youth describe protesting with family, peers, and teachers to advocate for educational equity, engaging in 'die-ins' to protest police brutality, and participating in marches to advocate for immigration reform [11,16,17[•]].

Racially marginalized youth use digital media (e.g., online videos, blogs, social media) to build a sense of community, share their stories, and access a larger audience for their social justice efforts [5,25,26,28,29[•],30]. For example, Black youth use social media hashtags (#BlackLivesMatter, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown) to facilitate dialogue about racial injustice, such as the murders of Black people by police, and to challenge stereotypical, hegemonic depictions of Black people in mainstream media [6,28,30,31]. Similarly, Latinx youth use social media to provide counter narratives to racialized and anti-immigrant discourse and to advocate for the rights of undocumented youth [31,32].

Youth often engage in multiple forms of sociopolitical action. Examining the nature of their sociopolitical action requires a lens that can account for the dynamic nature of this action across personal, spatial, and ecological boundaries.

Factors that shape sociopolitical action

Recent scholarship on youth activism has attended to three core factors that influence racially marginalized youth's participation in activism: sociopolitical development, sociocultural factors, and school context.

Critical sociopolitical development (SPD) includes youth's ability to critically analyze systemic oppression (i.e., critical social analysis or reflection), which is theorized to be a prerequisite to activism against oppression [33,34]. Critical agency, which includes motivation and confidence in their ability to make sociopolitical change, relates theoretically to youth activism and moderates the associations between analysis and activism [33]. Empirical examinations of SPD in youth have primarily focused on Black and Latinx youth and have found that critical analysis can provide motivation and clarity on how to engage in activism and related social actions. [1,4,17[•],25,35,36]. Critical agency is associated with higher orientation towards traditional action, community engagement, and activism [4,19,25]. Further, youth's sociopolitical action can serve as a source of their agency and a catalyst for their future action [3,17[•],22,25,37]. One study with Black and Latinx college students found that youth who participated in political activism in high school reported higher engagement in the Black Lives Matter Movement and in advocacy for immigration reform through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy [25]. Other studies have found differences in the sociopolitical pathways to activism among Black and Latinx youth, although the trends are inconsistent [1,4,9,25]. Work that aims to elucidate potential variations in the factors that shape activism among different groups of racially marginalized youth in the United States would benefit the field going forward.

Sociocultural factors such as racially discriminatory experiences, racial identity, and racial socialization are theorized to shape activism of racially marginalized youth [38]. Witnessing societal racism (e.g., deportation, police killings of unarmed Black people) and experiencing racism on campus help to shape youth's critical analysis and provide the impetus for digital and on-the-ground action [7,16,29[•],36,39]. Racially marginalized youth who experience more racial discrimination report more sociopolitical action generally and more activism oriented towards promoting racial equity [19,37,40,41]. However, the link between discrimination and sociopolitical action varies depending on the types of discrimination experienced (e. g. institutional, cultural, interpersonal) and the types of sociopolitical action assessed (e.g., low risk versus high risk) [37,41].

Researchers have also found that youth's collective racial and/or immigrant identity contributes to their motivation to advocate for their community [3,39,42,43] and shapes the types of activism that they engage in [37,41,44]. One study found that Black youth for whom race is central to their identity and who endorsed the uniqueness of and preference for Black institutions (e.g., nationalist ideology) participated in more low-risk racial justice activism (e.g., wearing political clothing) [37]. However, only nationalist ideology was also related to youth's high-risk

racial justice activism (e.g., blocking buildings in protest). These findings suggest that the associations between racial identity and action may vary depending on the types of activism assessed [37,41,44]. Youth's experiences of racial socialization may also strengthen commitments to sociopolitical action; however, more work is needed to clarify these relations [45].

Schools in the United States have been extensively investigated as an influence on youth's sociopolitical action. Civics and social justice courses can increase youth awareness of marginalization, cultivate a commitment to social change, and strengthen the relations between youth's agency and action [17•,19]. However, school climate likely influences whether youth perceive their schools as affirming spaces for sociopolitical growth which can translate to increases in civic engagement [46]. Many racially marginalized youth experience racially contentious school climates with minimal racial-ethnic diversity [13,26,27,47,48], biased peers [7,11,26,39], and inequitable academic resources [5,16,47,49]. These experiences can thwart youth activism by contributing to self-doubt or invisibility in school [16,47]. Many racially marginalized youth draw on their experiences of school-based racism to inform their critical social analysis and activism [11,16,29•,36,39,47–49]. Discrimination at their high schools or college campuses can drive youth to confront peers [11], organize campus-based protests [47,50,51], and facilitate social media campaigns to advocate for equity and inclusion [29]. Further, school climate can drive youth to engage in activism that transcends the academic context, such as advocating for immigration reform and racial justice [3,5,16,25,47].

Implications of sociopolitical action

Youth's sociopolitical action has positive and negative implications for their educational outcomes and civic development. Activism is positively associated with increased curiosity, higher GPA, and SAT scores over time [18,35]. In the process of engaging in activism, youth can also strengthen their literacy and writing skills [5]. Further, sociopolitical action can shape youth's career goals and facilitate the attainment of higher status jobs [22,52]. However, youth who engage in activism run the risk of some adverse educational outcomes as they may be targeted in school and punished or pushed out (e.g., losing DACA status) by school officials for speaking out about racism or other structural issues [3,39]. Sociopolitical action also helps students develop holistically, imparting skills that are vital for civic development. Through sociopolitical action, youth can increase critical social analysis [3,7,16,17•,24,39], critical agency [3,23••], and leadership skills [5,17•,22,23••].

Sociopolitical action is also associated with mental and emotional health outcomes. Racially marginalized youth's activism has been identified as a mechanism through which they heal from oppression through self-expression, community bonds, and social transformation [8,23••,36,53]. For undocumented youth, activism may allow them to navigate the fear and shame associated with their documentation status [3,43]. Activism also may have emotional costs (e.g., change in personal relationships and being labeled as emotionally unstable) [49]. Youth's frustration, sadness, and anger about injustice [12,15,23••,39,54], as well as highly publicized racial injustice events (e.g., the murders of unarmed Black people) can shape sociopolitical action [11,28,39]. However, youth describe feeling stressed and burdened from the constant responsibility to be an activist and exhausted by the slow pace of change [3,23••,36]. Additionally, evidence points to racial differences in the impact of activism for Black and Latinx youth such that activism seems to protect Latinx youth against the negative impact of racial microaggressions on their mental health but exacerbate the impact of racial microaggressions for Black youth [55••].

Recommendations for future work

Racially marginalized youth employ dynamic, multifaceted approaches to influencing and transforming their schools and communities. However, findings across the field regarding factors that shape youth action and the implications of said action are inconsistent. These mixed findings come from studies primarily focused on Black and Latinx youth. Although this emerging body of research is empirically and theoretically seeking to understand the nature of sociopolitical action and the factors that shape sociopolitical action, we still know surprisingly little about these processes among Black and Latinx youth in the United States. This is coupled with a dearth of literature on the sociopolitical action of other racially marginalized youth in the United States (e.g., Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander) [56]. Further, although not the focus of this paper, limited psychological work has examined the nature of and implications of sociopolitical action of racial marginalized youth in other nations with a history of racial stratification. The disparities in findings highlight a need for more research that examines the psychological impact of youth activism with special consideration to how the unique aspects of youth's sociopolitical history may shape their actions and the implications of their actions on their holistic development. As the study of sociopolitical action moves forward, scholars should consider how intersectionality theory can shape activism and how moving against systems affect the wellbeing of marginalized youth. To this end, we may need to employ a more interdisciplinary ethos and consult political science, education, social work, and public health.

Our understanding of the nature of racially marginalized youth's sociopolitical action is partially shaped by the measures available. Comprehensive measurements

[57–59] can help to holistically assess the range of youth's action. However, broadness and lack of identity-based specificity of measures may present challenges in assessing youth's intention behind their action (e.g., sustenance of political structures versus transformation) and the target of youth's action (e.g., racism, sexism, environmental justice). Recently, scholars have developed culturally relevant measurements that specifically assess youth's intention to address racial inequity [10••,14••,60]. These new measurements can be employed in future work to enhance our understanding of the precedents and antecedents of racially marginalized youth's actions to contest racism.

The emerging body of work on sociopolitical action implores policymakers and educators to structure policy and school environments to cultivate agency and sociopolitical actions while at the same time working with psychologists to understand the nature and implications of this work. Youth often carry the burden of creatively facilitating robust institutional change that results in racial justice and equity while simultaneously managing the social and psychological ramifications of their actions (e.g., psychological burnout, biased teachers and administrators, punishment) [16,39,49]. Policymakers and educators should acknowledge youth's roles as emerging community leaders by institutionalizing pathways and positions for youth power and influence.

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Nothing declared.

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