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Commentary

Contextual factors shaping diverse political action: A commentary on the special issue on adolescent political development



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ABSTRACT

This timely special issue on political development broadens the empirical conversation around how adolescents are engaging politically and civically, what factors shape their involvement, how their involvement impacts their wellbeing, and how to engage diverse populations of youth in the political system. From the perspectives of critical consciousness and sociopolitical development, we reflect on two themes in particular: the importance of context and the various ways in which political development and involvement is conceptualized and defined. We conclude with suggestions for future empirical work and implications for policy and practice.

This special issue takes up the important and timely topic of political socialization and development with a focus on how to engage diverse populations of youth in the political system. Currently America is fighting two pandemics, one of COVID-19 and the other of institutional racism. In this critical historical moment, we are presented with a new opportunity to include youth voices as we reimagine how to progress as a society. A strong democracy is created when all perspectives and voices are included in the political process. Especially, with youth, there is great potential for the development of novel ideas and social change when their voices are heard and valued (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Even more specifically, given documented disparities in political participation by gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997), it is imperative for us as scholars to understand ways to engage those who have been disenfranchised.

With the 2020 presidential election on the horizon, understanding the mechanisms and contextual factors that influence youth's action and participation is of paramount importance. The implications of the work presented in this special issue suggest important pathways and imperatives of how to bolster political development and action for youth in America and provide insight on directions for future empirical work. A key consideration includes a need to better understand the political experiences of youth who have been historically marginalized and barred from full participation in the political system, especially in the context of national systemic racial reckoning (Anyiwo, Palmer, Garrett, Starck, & Hope, 2020; Hart, Atkins, & Donnelly, 2004; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Therefore, the body of work presented in this special issue

reinforces the realities that in order for our democracy to thrive, there needs to be shifts in the political system to allow for a diversity of representation and engagement from its citizens.

Taken together these 7 papers contribute to the field of civic and political engagement and fill gaps in the literature by focusing on youth from varying regions, various racial/ethnic backgrounds, and political perspectives that have historically been understudied in psychological research and underrepresented in the political process. In addition to their conceptual and theoretical contributions, these papers are methodologically diverse and contribute to the study of political socialization using planned missing data, large panel samples, semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and public records.

We are delighted to have been invited to provide our commentary on the papers that make up this special issue. We read these papers through a lens of the current sociopolitical moment as well as through our own research interests and offer our experiences and points of view. As a scholar who focuses on Black parent school engagement and understandings of educational inequities and with expertise in both psychology and education (Aixa Marchand), I am particularly drawn to the Bowyer and Kahne (2020) article that emphasizes the importance of providing varied types of learning opportunities to students and its relation to increasing political engagement in youth. Additionally, as a scholar focused on the cultural factors that shape Black youth's healing and empowerment (Nkemka Anyiwo), I am drawn to Hope, Smith, Cryer-Coupet, and Briggs's (2020) examination of the impact of Black youth's experiences of racial discrimination stress on multiple dimensions of their critical consciousness.

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1. Theoretical grounding

As scholars of critical consciousness (Aixa Marchand) and socio-political development (Nkemka Anyiwo), with mutual interests in racial socialization messages, we analyze these papers through the lens of these pertinent theories in order to identify the contributions the special issue offers to the body of literature on political development and socialization. Although critical consciousness (CC) and sociopolitical development (SPD) are often discussed as separate theories, in line with early theoretical work, we discuss CC as a process nested in SPD.

CC has been described as an “antidote for oppression” and as “armor” that is psychologically protective against the oppressive societal systems in which youth of color reside (Seider & Graves, 2020; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). Originally conceptualized by Paulo Freire, CC is the analysis of the social conditions that one lives in and the action to change inequities observed and experienced (Freire, 1970). Current conceptualization of CC consists of three sub-components: critical reflection, critical agency, and critical action (Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2017; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Within critical action exists political behaviors such as voting, writing letters to legislators, and social change behaviors such as participating in marches and signing petitions (Diemer et al., 2017). CC can be nested into a broader theory of SPD, which examines the processes by which youth develop the knowledge, emotional faculties, and critical thinking skills to analyze and contest inequitable systems (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). Given the limited social and political power that youth who are under the age of 18 have in society, their ability to engage in action is theorized to be influenced by the extent to which they have meaningful opportunities to engage in action with mentorship and support from adults, also known as opportunity structures (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Research has presented mixed results about the ways that components of SPD may function as an antecedent to civic and political participation, whether conventional or unconventional. Some studies find ethnic and racial variations in the sociopolitical pathways to action (Diemer & Rapa, 2016). Further, limited empirical work has examined the role of opportunity structures in facilitating action. As described by Diemer and Rapa (2016), there is still a lack of clarity on the “ontogenesis” of CC and SPD. Thus, the current special issue presents a body of work that can serve to further the field's understanding of the precedents and antecedents of youth's political engagement.

In this commentary, we consider gaps in the literature that are partially addressed by these current studies and identify future directions to progress the field. Our analysis of the literature has identified two common themes across the papers in this special issue: 1) the importance of context in the political action of youth, and 2) the dynamic manifestations of political engagement. Given the current sociopolitical climate and our scholarship which focuses on Black youth and families, our recommendations for future research and policy are geared to youth who are historically racially marginalized.

2. The Importance of Context

The articles within this special issue pay special attention to the dynamic nature of the interactions between individuals and their contexts, both physical and social. Lerner, Wang, Champine, Warren, and Erickson (2014) posit that civic engagement develops through bidirectional interactions between the interpersonal and social contexts. In other words, participation and engagement must recognize the broader ecology of human development. Including the varying levels of systems of influence is necessary to gain a more nuanced and full understanding of what supports and fosters political development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Because of the varying combinations and intersections of individuals and contexts, it is imperative for research to explore the numerous trajectories that lead to positive civic engagement and social action outcomes for diverse youth.

Metzger, Alvis, and Oosterhoff (2020) presents to readers the importance of understanding geographical and contextual barriers and supports that influence youth civic participation. They found that adolescents who live in rural areas may differ from those who live in city contexts in their views of civic responsibility and efficacy. They also examine socioeconomic status and explore the intersections between geographic context and parents' socioeconomic status. Their work found that rural youth and youth who live in city contexts differed in their ratings of how much social praise was associated with political activity and how important and obligatory they believed it to be. Together, these findings help us understand how context shapes youths' individual views of themselves as effective political actors. These results shed light on the differing political concerns for youth living in different regions and communities that are facing different issues. However, with a sample of youth who predominantly identify as white, further research should examine how racial marginalized youth who reside in rural areas view civic responsibility and their civic efficacy. For example, most empirical work with Black adolescents has been conducted in urban areas with little consideration of the experiences of rural residing youth. Qualitative research has noted that Black rural communities may be detrimentally affected by the lack of economic resources in comparison to their suburban and urban and suburban counterparts, but conversely may benefit from collective socialization, or strategies to support other parents and monitor and guide children in the neighborhood (Berkel et al., 2009; Burton & Jarrett, 2000). With awareness of these positive and negative contextual factors that influence rural Black adolescent outcomes, further exploration of how these factors may impact youth political participation will help delineate ways to foster their political engagement.

McDevitt and Hopp (2020) use panel study data to explore political identity in counter-attitudinal climates. By counter-attitudinal they are referring to potentially confrontational and adversarial interactions. They found that in dissonant climates in battleground states, democrat identifying youth were more likely to disagreeing openly, initiating conversation, and testing opinions. This aligns with prior research that has found that environments with diverse perspectives and contentious discussions can serve as an optimal environment for youth to develop their political views and engage in action (Hess, 2009). Their work reminds us that engaging with others who may have dissenting perspectives and learning to manage and resolve disagreements are important in fostering democracy. Hess (2009) asserts that schools are the optimal place for this to happen and that teachers should not shy away from controversial topics but rather promote an understanding that dissent is a foundational part of civic life. While engaging with people who have different views may strengthen youth's political understanding and motivate their action, future work may consider how politically deviant contexts may function differently for youth of color. Indeed, political ideologies are often grounded in racial ideologies and can be rooted in racial bias as evident by the concurrent rise of the white supremacy movement with the rise of President Donald Trump (Tatum, 2017). Thus, for youth of color, dwelling in spaces with contentious political ideologies may present psychological and even physical danger.

Adults such as educators and mentors may play a large role in the political development and socialization of youth. In a longitudinal study of five charter schools all following different schooling models, Seider and Graves (2020) explore the ways in which pedagogical practices and educators foster a sense of CC of racial injustice and a development of a commitment to critical action. Their findings speak to the importance of educational spaces to offer learning opportunities promoting civic engagement and political activity. The Bowyer and Kahne (2020) article in this special issue takes on this exact issue of assessing the ways in which intentional civic education may impact learning opportunities. By examining panel data collected in Chicago Public Schools, they found that teaching about sharing perspectives led to more online political participation, but that teaching about

evaluating online content reduced online political participation. Further, teaching about offline civic engagement has a positive relationship with subsequent offline civic engagement. These findings indicate that schools continue to play a role in establishing participatory norms among students and play an important socializing agent. Further, these results point to the benefit of having a dedicated commitment to fostering civic engagement, as Chicago public schools has done by promoting civic education on a district level and requiring that high school students take a semester long civics course (Bowyer & Kahne, 2020).

Hope et al. (2020) help us better understand how the social context, in this case different forms of racism, affect Black adolescents' CC development. As mentioned, CC is theorized in three dimensions, critical reflection, critical agency, and critical action (Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Watts et al., 2011). Black youth's experiences with individual and cultural racism are associated with more critical reflection and critical agency, while all types of racial stress (individual, cultural, and institutional) are indirectly associated with higher levels of critical action. These findings in conjunction with theoretical work highlighting the importance of racial sociocultural processes, such as racial identity, parent socialization, and discrimination represent the necessity to further explore how youth experiences both personally and vicariously may impact their political behaviors and engagement (Anyiwo, Bañales, Rowley, Watkins, & Richards-Schuster, 2018).

3. Dynamic manifestations of political engagement

Involvement in the political process is multidimensional. There are various ways that youth can choose to engage and these articles push our thinking about what is considered political engagement, what influences it, and how it affects participants. Definitions of civic and political engagement have become increasingly inclusive and recognize both the "conventional" and "social-cause" efforts to help others, improve the community, and/or shape the future of society both at an individual and collective level (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Anyiwo, Palmer, et al., 2020; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). Further, civic and political engagement for youth encompasses the behaviors and actions they are participating in to make social and political change which include: volunteering for political campaigns, community organizing, writing, and signing petitions, activism, and joining civil rights organizations (Diemer et al., 2017; Gaby, 2017; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Shifts in what constitutes this engagement enables us to examine these political processes within youth samples. Youth often have not been considered within political spaces, because engagement has generally been conventionally conceptualized as voting, volunteering, and donating to political campaigns—activities that are largely inaccessible to youth in the United States below the age of eighteen. However, even without the legal ability to vote and contribute to our democracy in that way, youth are active and contributing socially and politically. By using definitions and measures that are inclusive of activities that youth are participating in, we can get a better sense of how they are engaging within the political system.

In their study on college students, Ballard, Ni, and Brocato (2020) paper describes diverse manifestations of action. They conceptualize traditional/standard political behaviors as actions that occur within existing political systems (e.g., voting, joining political groups) and "non traditional" political behaviors as actions oriented towards resisting existing political systems. Within what is considered nontraditional political behaviors includes activism (e.g., protesting) and expressive forms of action (e.g., wearing shirts with a social message). Engagement in the political system may manifest differently for youth of color. Ballard et al. (2020) work points to this as they have conceptualized membership in a cultural and ethnic organization as a form of political behavior. In future work, it is important to consider the motivations behind youth's engagement in political action. For example, historically marginalized youth may use "traditional" action as a tool for resistance against systems by engaging with and pursuing

leadership systems that have historically disenfranchised them. Similarly, youth may use nontraditional action to advocate for the sustenance of oppressive systems as illustrated by white supremacist protests. Recent measurements have assessed the diverse ways that racially marginalized youth or youth advocating for racial justice may engage in individual or collective action (Aldana, Bañales, & Richards-Schuster, 2019; Hope, Pender, & Riddick, 2019). Future work may use qualitative inquiry to excavate the different forms of action that youth engage in and the ideologies that drive these variations.

4. Future directions

The influence of adults on youth political socialization and development is only lightly covered in this special issue. Terriquez, Villegas, Villalobos, and Xu (2020) report that vertical socialization (from adult to youth) is not as impactful as horizontal socialization (peer to peer) and even may suppress participation in political action in some instances. In their sample of Latinx youth who are predominantly children of immigrants, these results make intuitive sense. Research has found that undocumented immigrants may avoid contact with social institutions out of fear immigration law enforcement (Blewett, Smaida, Fuentes, & Zuehlke, 2003; O'Leary & Sanchez, 2011). This fear may explain why parents who are undocumented may dissuade their children from participating in the political process that requires them to interact with systems in society more broadly (Cross et al., 2020).

Prior work exploring Latinx adolescents' reaction to Trump immigration policies found that youth in their study reported greater participation in civic activities such as voting, voter-registration, attending political rallies, and protests (Wray-Lake et al., 2018). The Terriquez et al. (2020) paper in conjunction with the McDevitt and Hopp (2020) paper help further explain and provide support for the increase in civic engagement that Wray-Lake et al. (2018) found. Latinx youth in the Terriquez et al. (2020) study reside in the Central Valley area of California that is largely conservative and anti-immigrant. These dominant perspectives create a potential hostile context where youth are encountering adults who voice opinions counter to their own. Connecting back to the McDevitt and Hopp (2020) article, they found that Democratic youth thrive when in counter-attitudinal climates suggesting the important ways regional ideological climates may impact on youth's political engagement and action.

Although the results from the Terriquez et al. (2020) article suggest that vertical forms of political socialization from parents and school educators may not encourage Latinx youth to be politically active, further exploration with parents from other backgrounds is needed. Trust between individuals and systems is an important initial consideration. A prerequisite for trust is the belief and understanding that institutions are trustworthy and "procedurally just" (Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, Hooper, & Cohen, 2017). Documented social injustices that Black Americans in the country have faced for 400 years may lead to feelings of distrust in systems within society. For instance, Black parents' experiences with racism in societal systems may introduce feelings of reticence to engage due to perceptions of or prior experiences with discrimination and alienation (Marchand, Vassar, Diemer, & Rowley, 2019; Wilson-Cooper, 2009). Parents' engagement and willingness to engage with the political system may serve as a model for their children. If parents view the system as contentious and off-putting, it may model for their children to be weary and disengage in conventional political actions. Therefore, future work exploring how Black parents' actions play a role in their children's political development and engagement is necessary to further understand how to foster political development and engagement in Black youth.

Although not specifically focused on parent action or youth action, prior work has documented how Black parents' beliefs and actions about societal inequities are related to their children's attributions about the achievement gap, a form of CC about educational equity (Bañales et al., 2020). Although this paper did not focus on adolescents'

action or political development, it lays the foundation for expecting a relationship between parents' perspectives and their adolescent child's view about society. [Bañales et al. \(2020\)](#) explore parental messages of racial socialization as a precursor of beliefs about racism and the Black-white achievement gap. These racial socialization messages from parents often cover and allude to the oppressive systems of race in this nation and develop a sense of critical reflection in youth of color. A wealth of research has shown that critical reflection of perceived inequality is associated with civic action ([Diemer & Rapa, 2016](#); [Hope et al., 2020](#)), therefore providing nascent evidence that parent racial socialization messages may affect political engagement in their children ([Anyiwo et al., 2018](#)).

Examining the influence of other adults such as teachers and mentors in sociopolitical development is also an important next step in the field. Scholars have identified intergenerational communal relationships between adults and youth as fostering youth's sociopolitical action ability to heal through critical resistance ([Ginwright, 2007](#)). When youth organize with the mentorship of adults, they can build skills in political engagement which will support them in feeling more efficacious to do so in the future. [Bowyer and Kahne \(2020\)](#) show the promise that online and offline civic learning opportunities have for youth engagement.

An important consideration that these articles take up is that political engagement and action might have both benefits and costs to youth that need to be further understood ([Ballard et al., 2020](#)). The psychosocial impact of political engagement may also vary depending on types of engagement and by racial/ethnic group. [Ballard et al. \(2020\)](#) found that traditional political behaviors were associated with positive indicators of wellbeing while activism and expressive forms of political behavior were adversely related to well-being. Although these associations were weak, they may exist because expressive forms of engagement are more related to affect and emotion and spur from emotional moments. However, while there were associations between political engagement and wellbeing for youth from racial/ethnic backgrounds, there were no associations for Black youth. Previous work has also among Black and Latinx students in associations between their political engagement and wellbeing (e.g., [Hope, Velez, Offidani-Bertrand, Keels, & Durkee, 2018](#)). In the current special issue [Hope et al. \(2020\)](#) found that Black youth's experiences of racial stress was associated with their CC, highlighting that youth may be coping with racism through the process of critical reflection, building their agency, and participation in critical action. Further, in qualitative work, youth of color identify political and community organizing as therapeutic ([Ortega-Williams, Wernick, DeBower, & Brathwaite, 2020](#)). The differential findings in the field reflect a need to explicate the factors that may shape psychological implications of action on mental health and clarify the extent to which different forms of action yield different psychological outcomes for youth ([Anyiwo, Palmer, et al., 2020](#)). [Ballard et al.'s \(2020\)](#) assessment of expressive action includes youth's expression online, which particularly, in the global pandemic, is a fruitful space for sociopolitical action and change. Thus, future work should more deeply identify implications of digital forms of action on the wellbeing of youth.

5. Considerations for policy and practice

The body of work discussed in this special issue has significant implications for policy and practice. Educators, policy makers, and practitioners should be aware of the ways that context may differentially shape youths' engagement in various political and civic actions, beliefs about their civic responsibilities, and perceptions of their own efficacy.

5.1. Policy

Those in decision making positions can utilize the results presented

in this special issue to inform their policy choices. Findings from [Hart, Allred, and Atkins \(2020\)](#) paper point to evidence that lowering the voting age does not indicate that youth unequivocally take on their parents' partisan identifications. Lowering the voting age is an important consideration moving forward for many reasons: it can politically mobilize and engage an age cohort whose voice has largely been absent in decisions making spaces and may contribute to an increase long-lasting political representation across the lifespan ([Coppock & Green, 2016](#)).

Given that we observe documented disparities in political action, there is a need to further unpack the causes of these disparities. For example, these disparities might occur by function of structural barriers that constrain access to opportunity structures in general and to political participation such as access to voting, in particular. Historically voter suppression has marginalized Black communities and communities of color from fully participating in the political process, and more recently we have seen blatant actions such as moved mailboxes and closed polling locations. Therefore, policy makers should be informed of the myriad barriers youth and especially youth of color may face when instituting policy decisions.

5.2. Practice

The current special issue offers important considerations for programmatic efforts and clinical work with youth. Schools may play a significant role in cultivating youth's political engagement on and off-line ([Bowyer & Kahne, 2020](#)). Thus, educators should consider how different pedagogical strategies such as engaging in debate or dialogue with dissenting perspectives ([McDevitt & Hopp, 2020](#)) or supporting youth in sharing and evaluating perspectives ([Bowyer & Kahne, 2020](#)) can shape how youths' sociopolitical engagement. The studies highlight the importance of considering the unique experiences of youth in identifying how best to support them. For example, youth in different locales may vary in their perspectives about political engagement and thus, programmatic efforts may need to be tailored to the unique needs and experiences of urban, rural, and suburban youth ([Metzger et al., 2020](#)). Youth, particularly those from backgrounds that have been historically marginalized, may engage in the analysis of injustice and participate in action to contest injustice as a mechanism to cope with the stresses associated with discrimination ([Hope et al., 2020](#)). Nevertheless, youth's engagement in resistance against political systems may be adversely associated with their psychology wellbeing ([Ballard et al., 2020](#)). Thus, youth advocates should consider engaging clinicians in their programmatic advocacy work with youth and consider integrating content in curricula aimed to support youth psychologically and emotionally as they engage social change.

6. Conclusion

As [Barber \(2003\)](#) reminds us, a "strong democracy" is one where participants not only are spectators who vote, but rather promote the type of society they wish to see by expressing their views and being active in their community. Youth have a unique perspective in that they can envision a world that is more just and equitable for all ([Flanagan, 2013](#)). The political habits of youth set the foundation for their future participation in adulthood, therefore by creating spaces where youth can engage could have a long-term impact of increased civic participation ([Coppock & Green, 2016](#)). Especially in the current moment—the movement for Black lives and the continued fight for racial and social justice, it is crucial that as researchers, practitioners, and educators we find ways to listen to youth voice and support their political engagement in order to ensure our democracy functions as it was designed and that our generation leave the world better for those who will follow.

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