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A Spotlight on Context in the Developmental Science of Civic Engagement

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Attention to how youth living in high poverty neighborhoods become engaged in civic life is an important and timely issue. The monograph authored by Wray-Lake and Abrams (2020), *Pathways to Civic Engagement among Urban Youth of Color*, motivates developmental scientists to think more deeply about how the structural factors of race and class shape youth development in general, and civic engagement in particular. The core issue addressed in this monograph illuminates the centrality of context for understanding youth civic engagement. In an approach which challenges white, middle-class models of youth development, the authors use rich, qualitative data to identify gaps in past thinking about civic engagement among the most disenfranchised segments of society. In my commentary, I highlight major contributions from their project. Further, I emphasize how a developmental science approach opens the opportunity to link the experience of individuals to larger invisible structures more dynamically than can approaches that fail to consider co-actions among individuals, their social positions, and the environments in which they develop.

First, the population under study—youth of color living in urban poverty—features an underrepresented group in the study of civic engagement. From the start, Wray-Lake and Abrams are careful to explain the assumptions that led them to focus on their chosen neighborhood context. By drawing attention to the challenges and barriers that come with living in urban poverty, and by identifying the prominence of violence in daily life in particular, the authors situate the experiences of these youth in meaningful ways. With this framework, youth behaviors are not narrowly presented as a characteristic of race, or poverty, or urbanicity. Instead, they are described in a more nuanced and empirically-informed manner which leads to a far more complex picture of how adversity may arise and shape the attitudes and behaviors of youth.

Second, the ability to identify the prominence of violence in daily life results from the qualitative method employed by the authors. This approach gives voice to youth, allowing their definitions of the situation to emerge. As postulated by Thomas and Thomas (1928), if situations are defined "as real, they are real in their consequences." In other words, a subjectively defined experience, whether perceived by an outside observer as an objective reality or not, shapes an individual's behavior. Wray-Lake and Abrams identify the prominence

of violence as a theme and use it to elucidate a key contextual factor that must be recognized to understand pathways of civic engagement. The methods they used in their qualitative data collection and analysis exhibit high levels of rigor. Furthermore, the detail with which they described their methodology enhances the value of their work because it provides future researchers with the information they would need to replicate or extend the current research.

Primary and central to this monograph is the definition of civic engagement. This multi-dimensional concept invokes value-laden normative assumptions that incur political and economic expectations (Martinson & Minker, 2006). Wray-Lake and Abrams broaden the dialogue in the case of youth by showcasing various forms of civic engagement. In so doing, they extend traditional notions to show that informal personal actions such as caring for younger siblings or a friend represent important expressions of civic engagement for the youth in their study. Specifically, they draw attention to the link between the individual and larger structures to advance understanding of the conditions in which civic engagement is practiced. Whether youth engage in civic engagement or not is one issue, but more importantly is how the authors emphasize meaning attributed to diverse forms of civic engagement identified.

Meaning arises within context. The primacy of emphasizing the person-context relationship, and in particular identifying meaningful contextual factors, demonstrates the importance of recognizing structural aspects of human development. This approach illustrates both cases of resilience, that is, cases in which people actively pursue civic engagement, as well as cases of resignation, that is, people who turn away from civic engagement. Youth civic engagement is illuminated by showing how contextual factors at multiple levels link to individuals. In addition, it provides a valuable framework for thinking about civic engagement across the life course and among diverse populations.

Another welcome contribution of the monograph by Wray-Lake and Abrams is the primacy given to various institutions. Two are highlighted at length—family and youth organizations, and a third is considered more briefly—religious organizations. Invoking a connection with a religious institution seems important, as there is a prominent literature of the role churches play in the lives of urban communities of color, especially for promoting positive well-being (Farquar, Michael & Wiggins, 2005; Young, Patterson, Wolff, Greer & Wynne, 2015). For youth, spirituality may be more salient than organized religion (Dill, 2017). Nevertheless, ideologies derived from religion and spirituality are an understudied phenomenon that may have important impacts on attitude, particularly efficacy, and behaviors. After all, it is through the practice of behaviors, or individual actions, that we are able to better see the ways in which ideas, norms, and values influence the individual and vice versa (Lemert, 2012). Identifying how and when links to multiple institutions inform youth actions may yield deeper insights into the ways in which civic engagement is practiced.

A final, and perhaps most critical point is that the attention to youth in poverty-stricken communities of color invites developmental scientists to seriously consider culture as a central element of analysis. It has been argued, both in my own work and that of others, that culture refers not only to group differences in ways of thinking and behaving. For example, it is not enough to categorize a person who is participating in research as a person of color or as poor. Instead, group positions must be understood as influential confluences of circumstances and experiences that permeate every aspect of the institutions that shape life experiences (Ajrouch, 2015).

The admired forms of civic engagement in middle-class, mostly white, U.S. society, tend toward conservative visions aimed at supplementing, if not replacing, state-sponsored support programs (Martinson & Minkler, 2006). As Wray-Lake and Abrams illustrate, forms of civic engagement that arise as meaningful for those living in poor urban neighborhoods may include helping a friend refrain from drug use or caring for younger siblings. Further, there are numerous cases in which community members make a deliberate decision to not engage in the community, keeping to themselves as a form of self-protection from adversity around them (e.g., gang violence). All forms of civic engagement, and whether or not people are civically engaged, need to be understood in cultural context.

Culture is what gives meaning to daily lives. Accounting for culture in the study of youth development potentially advances the field by connecting the macro and micro levels of human experience (Ajrouch, 2015). Assumptions of positive changes in communities underlie the culture of being civically engaged, yet the drive to achieve community change often requires a sense of entitlement. Invisible inequalities, a phrase coined by Lareau (2000), refers to ideologies or the lenses through which reality is perceived. A foundation of middle-class ideology is the belief that individuals, if they work hard enough, can create for themselves the world that they desire. Yet, this very same ideology hides the very real constraints that derive from the structure of the U.S. class system. A competitive class system requires that there be disadvantaged populations willing to work for low pay. Vectors of inequality are often multi-pronged, with race, class, and gender paramount. Wray-Lake and Abrams draw our attention to race and class in youth development; both intersect to result in cumulative disadvantages for the population they have studied. Further, the policing of disadvantaged populations tends to instill in youth a world view marked by constraint and mistrust, rather than a world marked by opportunity and hope (Goffman, 2009). The form and extent of adversity is lifespan and cumulative, descending from structures and institutions within society, and becoming part of cultural context.

Structures, institutions, and contexts that threaten survival make larger order aspirations difficult to envision, let alone to pursue. In other words, if a young person strives to make it through the day without encountering violence in the streets or at home, that same young person may have few resources left to aspire to and make the community a better place. The more immediate goals of helping a friend stay away from drug use, or keeping a close eye on siblings while parents work are the kinds of goals that emerge as critical, and perhaps even more important, civic engagement activities for youth. Answering the question as to why violence permeates disadvantaged neighborhoods requires an understanding of the invisible inequalities that create and sustain differential world views. Structures of race and class are key sources of inequality that inform challenges faced by disadvantaged communities. Specifically, the social institutions that distribute opportunities unevenly in relation to these structures create and reinforce challenges in poor minority neighborhoods by rewarding those with world views that meet normative, white middle-class assumptions.

Infusing culture into developmental science illuminates the connection between structural and personal levels of human experience. Race and class are key contextual factors; both shape life trajectories in profound ways. Dominant cultural narratives about civic engagement promote positive contributions to community and society as well as normative forms of civic engagement, but these may not be the same for everyone. Attending to the larger structural

and historical experiences of communities of color highlights how inequalities, often invisible, shape expectations about civic engagement. By understanding culture as the fiber that connects societal- and individual-level experiences, we can better see how institutional practices and societal circumstances lead to individual and group expectations.

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