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Pathways to Civic Engagement: Contributions, Unanswered Questions, and Multi-Level Investments

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Suicide death rates for Black youth are increasing at alarming rates (Lindsey et al., 2019), and Latinx families report heightened anxiety amidst recent changes in immigration policy resulting in parent-child separations (Bouza et al., 2018). Both groups are impacted by continuing epidemic violence while a new pandemic, COVID-19, ravages and disproportionately impacts youth and families of color in the U.S. and worldwide. Fortunately, the informative, promising, and well-executed monograph by Wray-Lake and Abrams (2020), [Pathways to Civic Engagement among Urban Youth of Color](#) (hereafter *Pathways*), provides reason for hope and introduces civic engagement as a pathway to healing. In this commentary, I discuss key contributions of the monograph, identify unanswered questions, and suggest interventions to promote civic empowerment and foster the health and well-being of urban youth of color.

Key Contributions

Pathways is replete with important and timely contributions that advance empowerment, sociopolitical development, and positive youth development theories for urban youth of color. Especially salient contributions are: (a) highlighting racism as an enduring reality for urban youth of color; (b) offering a nuanced portrait of urban youth of color's civic engagement experiences; and (c) promoting urban youth of color as resilient and agentic in the face of racial adversity.

Racism as Ubiquitous in the Lives of Youth of Color

Consistent with ecological systems perspectives (e.g., Spencer, 1995) and recent empirical work examining links between racism and civic engagement (Hope et al., 2016, 2019), *Pathways* foregrounds institutional and structural racism as critical, salient, pervasive, and organizing adverse forces in the life experiences of urban youth of color. It establishes that civic engagement develops in the context of racial discrimination and issues an imperative to address structural racism. Not surprisingly, racism is one of the most common community problems identified by youth and emerges as an important contributing factor to political engagement.

Recognizing racism as central to the lived experiences of urban youth of color is significant for several reasons. First, *Pathways* forces us to reconsider and envision theoretical perspectives (e.g., positive youth development) that fail to address the developmental impact of these experiences in depth. Doing so is a win, because it challenges the field of developmental science to recognize youth whose experiences have long been marginalized. Second, recognizing racism as a factor that contributes to civic development signals that deconstructing racism is crucial to promoting the civic engagement and well-being of urban youth of color. This step must be an integral part of interventions, programs, and policies that promote civic engagement. As White nationalism and hate crimes against racial and ethnic minorities are on the rise (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017), and as youth report “fearing racism from Donald Trump” (*Pathways*, p. 65), understanding how racism shapes civic engagement is important now, more than ever.

Unique Expressions of Civic Engagement for Urban Youth of Color

A second noteworthy contribution of *Pathways* is its depiction of what civic engagement looks like for urban youth of color living in high poverty neighborhoods. Civic engagement takes many forms that range from cleaning up the community, to anti-violence speeches, to doing well in school. I was most intrigued by the extent to which the informal helping actions highlighted in *Pathways* resonate with the values and worldview of African and other collectivist cultures. For example, in many African cultures, there is no “I” without a “we.” To be human is to belong to the whole community, the actions of the individual have consequences for the entire community, the interest of the community takes precedence over those of the individual, and “participation in the society” is a defining feature of a “corporate moral responsibility” (Grills, 2004, p. 181). Helping neighbors and the less fortunate, intervening to protect others from harm, and pursuing achievement and avoiding risky behaviors are all ways to strengthen the community, and all are consistent with this cultural framing. Moreover, informal helping behaviors identified in *Pathways* (e.g., caring for elders and helping grandparents with chores) are valuable forms of engagement consistent with Black and Latinx families’ valuing of family orientation, solidarity, and cohesion.

The connection between informal civic engagement and cultural values that align with urban youth’s values reinforces *Pathways’* assertion that civic engagement goes beyond behaviors to include psychological dimensions such as values, beliefs, attitudes, skills, and knowledge. These dimensions are shaped by culture. Cultural practices, institutions and structural forces shape human behavior and actions (Mendoza-Denton & España, 2010). Thus, it would be a mistake to construct conceptualizations and measures of youth engagement without accounting for how different cultural values and beliefs inform expressions of civic engagement. The contribution of *Pathways* comes not only from challenging the field to broaden the scope and dimensions of the construct of civic helping and participation, nor from calling for a richer set of measures that include formal dimensions of helping. It also comes from reminding us that it is important to consider the broader cultural context if we are to capture the full breadth of urban youth of color’s experiences.

Youth of Color as Resilient and Agentic

A third substantive contribution of *Pathways* is its casting of urban youth of color (and their communities) as resilient and agentic, even in the face of adversity. *Pathways'* portrayal is a welcome one in a society that does not always highlight the resilience and strengths of urban youth. Through its consideration of civic empowerment and acknowledgement that Rochester youth hail from a community with rich histories of activism and the capacity for strength and resilience, *Pathways* challenges negative stereotypes of urban youth of color as unengaged or as thugs or violent criminals; or as loud, aggressive, and sexualized. Instead, it describes an impressive breadth of civic engagement experiences while characterizing youth as agents of social change who actively think about how they and others can address community problems.

In line with Hope and Spencer's (2017) conceptualization of civic participation as a proactive coping reaction for youth of color to counter adversity, *Pathways* illustrates how community violence and other racial injustices spur youth to act as social-change agents to address these problems. One of the most salient examples from the monograph is the way in which youth actively monitored their geographical locations and choices of peers to preserve their own safety, even though these actions meant disengaging somewhat from the community. Another nuanced example of adaptation and resilience to community violence was "intervening in fights or standing up to gang members" (p. 120). These strategies reminded me of Majors and Billson's (1992) classic book *Cool Pose*, which describes unique ways that, although they confer risk for Black men, reflect self-preservation and nuanced ways of responding to adversity. *Pathways* not only casts urban youth of color as resilient and agentic, but also pushes theories of civic and positive youth, and the field of adolescent development more generally, to cast away assumptions that certain outcomes are positive or good while others are necessarily negative or risky.

Unanswered Questions and Future Research

I now mention three burning questions that occurred to me while reading *Pathways*, and suggest how the field might address them. Deliberate work in these areas could maximize intervention and policy efforts to promote civic empowerment as a pathway to healing and as an antidote to current ills, day-to-day stressors, and challenges faced by urban youth of color.

Examine Individual Differences in Civic Engagement

A recurring question in *Pathways*, and one I found myself pondering often, is: *For whom and under what conditions do adversities lead to civic engagement or disengagement?* *Pathways* acknowledges a host of individual differences that might play a role in shaping civic engagement. Among these are age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, religious or spiritual beliefs, and national sociopolitical contexts. For example, I wondered if there were gender-identity differences in civic engagement behaviors such as breaking up fights versus, say, helping neighbors. A simple place to build upon the excellent foundation provided by *Pathways* would be to examine group differences in civic engagement and patterns of correlations linking individual difference variables and civic engagement. Some early work has examined gender and ethnicity in the context of political activism in Black and Latinx college students, but quantitative studies focusing on only adolescents of color are rare.

Not surprisingly, evidence suggests that rather than simple main effects, race and ethnicity interact with other individual difference variables such as gender, racial identity, immigration status, prior activism and previous discriminatory experiences.

Illustratively, in a study examining participation in Black Lives Matters and advocacy for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Hope et al. (2016) found no gender differences for Black college students, but greater involvement in both movements for Latina women than Latino men. Prior activism and immigration status predicted civic engagement for Black students, whereas racial/ethnic microaggressions and political efficacy predicted engagement for Latinx youth. More recently, Hope et al. (2019) described main effects of racial identity on Black adolescents' and emerging adults' activism orientation and an interaction between institutional discrimination and public regard beliefs, such that for Black youth who believed others did not see their racial group favorably, higher levels of institutional discrimination were associated with higher levels of activism-orientation. Taken together, these studies suggest some complexity in our understanding of civic engagement and empowerment and highlight the need for theoretically anchored studies that examine the intersections of not only identities and experiences of oppression (Santos & Toomey, 2018) but also of the aforementioned individual factors to predict civic engagement.

Two approaches that might prove informative in understanding individual difference factors that shape civic engagement include ecological momentary assessment (EMA) and person-centered profile analyses (PCA). An important advantage of EMA studies is that they allow repeated sampling of behaviors and experiences in real time in natural environments, while isolating within-person variation in outcomes. An interesting observation from *Pathways* is that even youth who “mostly expressed disempowerment had moments of feeling emotionally empowered” (p. 81). Careful analyses, for example using electronic diaries, could use EMA to better understand within-person variation in racial stressors as contributors to empowerment or disempowerment, with implications for programs, interventions and policy. PCA, a technique that investigates how variables combine across individuals and is well suited to multidimensional constructs (Neblett et al., 2016), could further elucidate profiles and pathways of civic engagement. Building on the four pathways of engagement identified in *Pathways*, PCA could identify combinations of key dimensions identified in the monograph (types of civic engagement/action; civic empowerment dimensions; local vs. national engagement; and so on) to further validate and refine the proposed pathways.

Civic Socialization and Precursors to Civic Engagement

The second question that piqued my curiosity was: *What is the process by which civic engagement develops from childhood to emerging adulthood?* Wray-Lake and Abrams (2020) suggest four pathways, examine civic empowerment as a critical correlate of engagement, and identify relevant assets; yet, they leave questions regarding the directionality of effects and examination of civic development to future research. Does speaking out result in feeling connected to a larger political movement or vice-versa? Does civic action lead to emotional empowerment, does empowerment lead to action, or could it be both? Evidence suggests that civic development begins prior to adolescence (Patterson et al., 2019), but the process and mechanisms by which it develops are unclear. As a racial socialization researcher, I wondered what processes facilitate the formation of youth's awareness of current and political events and

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their beliefs about social issues—the “fundamental building blocks for political action” (p. 69). What do parents, teachers, and other nonparental adults say or do to promote civic empowerment, engagement, and purpose (Malin et al., 2015)? How? When? Do these behaviors change over time? Do these agents of civic development convey implicit messages that shape youth’s political beliefs? What role do peers and other cultural forces (e.g., the current political climate and government) and macrosystems factors contribute to civic development over time? Because youth’s feelings about the government can precede political disengagement, what are short- and long-term implications for urban youth’s civic development given that Americans’ current trust in the government is at all-time lows (Pew Research Center, 2017)?

Empirical examination of civic development trajectories and developmental pathways of civic engagement could help to elucidate how civic development occurs and changes over time. Do experiences and behavioral manifestations of civic engagement change during adolescence as youth make cognitive and other developmental gains? Do individual difference factors such as racial identity—a developmental process in its own right—covary with changes in engagement over time? Combining individual difference and developmental perspectives, latent transition analyses could be a useful tool to examine changes in civic engagement membership profiles and trajectories over time. What are turning points and points of continuity or discontinuity in civic development as youth traverse childhood and adolescence?

Family, Community, and Structural Investments to Promote Civic Engagement

My third and final question moves to application, and asks: *What can we do now to promote family, school, community, and structural-level investments (i.e., programs, interventions, policy) in fostering civic engagement?* A teen’s description of four life options that include gang banger, drug dealer, drop out, and teen pregnancy, alongside youth’s gut-wrenching descriptions of disturbing interactions with their teachers, highlighted urgent opportunities to shape and facilitate youth’s civic engagement through interventions, programs, and policies. *Pathways* offers several promising strategies and interventions to promote civic engagement. The ones that were most striking to me were: prioritizing schools as safe havens, transforming urban schools into contexts of positive youth development, rethinking everyday interactions with youth, creating civic opportunities, and addressing the systemic and structural roots of community violence.

Sadly, youth’s experiences with teachers in *Pathways* resonated with some of the experiences of youth we found in our own studies in which youth were discouraged by both the things teachers said and by things they did (i.e., nonverbal cues). *Pathways* suggests that teachers should put aside negative assumptions about youth, listen to youth and lift them up, and take them seriously; yet, in a society in which messages, symbols and negative stereotypes of these youth are ubiquitous, these recommendations may be easier said than done. Implicit bias is real, and teachers may not even be aware of what their own nonverbal behavior is conveying. The youth in *Pathways* tell us exactly what they want from teachers in their own words: teachers who get to know them on a personal level, share personal stories, make eye contact, ask them their opinions, and express belief in their potential. Hoping that teachers will put aside negative assumptions is aspirational, but perhaps it might be productive to share these data with teachers to help them not only modify interpersonal exchanges with students, but

also create sustained programming and structural (e.g., curricular) changes in schools that might foster the very types of interaction students long for, and which are identified in *Pathways* as critical assets to foster engagement.

In the family context, *Pathways* suggests talking to youth about serious issues related to race and racism to improve interactions with youth. Yet, in our own interactions with urban families of color, parents have reported that they are not always sure of the best ways to engage their children in these conversations, and youth have reported that when conversations do occur, they feel lectured at rather than listened to or heard. Conversations are important, but a worthwhile investment may be equipping parents—like teachers and other nonparental adults—with the skills they need to have effective and meaningful conversations with youth around these issues (see Anderson et al., 2019, for a promising approach).

With regard to creating civic opportunities and implementing structural interventions, structural barriers to participation that include not only personal safety, but also youth's working and taking care of siblings and other household responsibilities (Burrow, 2015), must be considered. Are there additional barriers, and what investments might mitigate risk to personal safety and increase access to opportunities? School- and community-level changes must be accompanied by the structural dismantling of racism and other policies that allow community violence and other barriers to persist. Youth cannot participate in opportunities, and families cannot serve as assets if they are contending with food insecurity, substandard housing, or poor health due to insufficient health care. Thus, to provide conditions that allow family, school, and community interventions, programs, and policies to take hold and yield the fruit of promoting civic engagement, it is essential to address the root causes of racism and reverse structural disinvestment in urban communities. Moreover, new investments must be sustained. Investing in a barbecue here, a block party there, do not civic engagement make!

Conclusion

Pathways provides an innovative, compelling and transformative set of ideas that not only advances our understanding of civic engagement in youth of color, but also challenges, shifts, and refines theories of empowerment, civic and positive youth development. It provides a strong foundation and roadmap for the next generation of studies examining civic engagement and wellbeing for urban youth of color. In this commentary, I briefly outlined salient contributions, unanswered questions, and strategies for programs, interventions, and policies intended to promote civic engagement in urban youth of color. None of these is exhaustive, and next steps will require more careful and substantive analysis; yet, through strategic and data-informed approaches, with multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multidisciplinary research teams and community-informed partnerships, civic engagement can be fostered and advanced as a critical tool for navigating racism and community violence and for promoting the healthy development of urban and all youth of color.

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