

Smith, E. P. (2020). *Everyday Acts of Kindness and Bravery: Understanding Civic Engagement in Marginalized Contexts*. [Peer commentary on the article "[Pathways to Civic Engagement among Urban Youth of Color](#)" by L. Wray-Lake and L. S. Abrams]. *Monograph Matters*. Retrieved from <https://monographmatters.srkd.org/2020/05/12/commentary-smith-85-2/>

## Everyday Acts of Kindness and Bravery: Understanding Civic Engagement in Marginalized Contexts

Emilie Phillips Smith  
University of Georgia  
[Emilie.Smith@uga.edu](mailto:Emilie.Smith@uga.edu)

*"I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across  
the water to create many ripples" ----Mother Teresa*

What is civic engagement? How is civic engagement played out in the lives of marginalized youth living in impoverished, and often violent neighborhood contexts? These are the questions driving this rich, qualitative study by [Wray-Lake and Abrams \(2020\)](#) which seeks to understand the types of agency exhibited by adolescents growing up in challenging contexts. I find the invitation to write a commentary on this monograph both an honor and a challenge given that my own work is dedicated to understanding empowering family and community contexts that lead to positive youth development. Place-based research attends to the ways in which context offers not only challenges but also developmental assets. In our notions of resilience, increasingly we are realizing that it is not in perfection, but at times in struggle, that our true character is unveiled. Though we should use our available research, practice, and public policy to reduce challenges and inequities young people face, we must not assume that seeming perfection is what leads to optimal development. If this were true, cases of addiction, suicide, divorce, and depression would not exist among the upper socio-economic strata. Indeed, the contributions of resilience theory are to explore trajectories of positive development, particularly in the face of opposition. This parallels the driving notion of this manuscript—that challenging contexts could inspire engaged youth to action.

Numerous developmental theories explore themes of resilience and developmental assets. Relational developmental systems, one of the theoretical notions underlying positive youth development (PYD), posits that youth are agentic, influenced by *and* influencing their contexts (Lerner et al., 2015). Leading scholars readily acknowledge that more of the work addressing PYD needs to attend to youth of diverse racial-ethnic backgrounds. Emerging work is already expanding the conceptualization of PYD to include attention to aspects of youth's racial-ethnic identity as an individual-level asset (Williams et al., 2014). Further, when young people perceive that adults care and engage them, youth demonstrate more respect for adults. Thus, *respecto* is a cultural variable that might be yet another "C" in the PYD model of caring, connected, competent, confident, contributing youth of character. In our research with youth across multiple urban, suburban, and rural locales, we find cultural values of respect among African American youth to be salient to prosociality (caring for and listening to others) and the

prevention of problem behavior (Smith et al., 2018). Still other research in PYD is exploring aspects of the programs themselves designed to promote racial-ethnic identity and cultural values (Brittian Loyd & Williams, 2017). Thus, though more research is certainly needed, emerging scholarship is advancing research on conceptual models of PYD salient to youth of diverse racial-ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

At the crux of so much of our developmental thought has been the fit and adaptation of the individual to the context (Eccles et al., 1993). The Integrative Model, conceptualized by a collaborative of esteemed scholars of diverse backgrounds, describes the role of micro-systems such as family, peers, and neighborhoods. Particular attention is given to cultural competencies developed in these contexts that help individuals to successfully navigate positive adjustment (García Coll et al., 1996). Some of the cultural competencies might be more indigenous to the group, while others may have evolved to adapt to the context. Parental attitudes about youth involvement, supervision, and limiting time for outdoor play in challenging, impoverished, and violent neighborhoods, discussed in the manuscript, provide examples of these sorts of socio-cultural imperatives (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Importantly, the Integrative Model not only attends to ways in which various systems might be problematic, it also examines ways in which contexts can be promotive.

The Integrative Model was one of the first models in developmental science to explicitly acknowledge larger systems of racism, discrimination, and policy that have been largely responsible for historical barriers to education, discrimination in housing, and ultimately concentrated, impoverished neighborhoods. Navigating these contexts affects the identity of the youth. Spencer and her colleagues (1997; Hope & Spencer, 2017) highlight the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (P-VEST) model that describes the multiple ways in which youth may adapt. Given the racialized messages from various levels of the ecological systems, youth may internalize pejorative views of themselves and their life possibilities, adopting an “oppositional identity” and maladjusted pathways to goal attainment. In contrast, another pattern is seen in youth whose adaptive and promotive contexts help them to define their identity and future prospects in more positive ways that foster achievement.

Thus, the Integrative Model (García Coll et al., 1996) and P-VEST (Spencer et al., 1997) can be combined with other developmental models (Eccles et al., 1993; Lerner et al., 2015) to weave a nomological net that helps to better understand the contexts in which civic engagement might be identified and observed among urban Black and Brown youth. Given the central theme of the Integrative Model, more developmental research on marginalized youth is needed not only in the contexts of poverty and violence, but also to allow richer portraits of normative development. Developmental science still lacks information on the over 80 percent of youth of color who graduate from high school, a proportion that has increased over the past several decades. Further, Black student college enrollment increased by 73 percent between 2000 and 2010, with 16 percent having a college degree and 25 percent being employed in managerial and professional occupations (de Brey, et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2007). The call from McLoyd (2006) for research on normative development still resonates. More recently, developmental science has been exploring positive youth development among youth of color around the globe (Cabrera et al., 2015; Petersen et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2017; Wium & Dimistrova, 2019). Developmentally, so much research focuses upon understanding trajectories in adolescence;

### 3 Smith

we seem to lack research on middle childhood that potentially informs engagement in later years.

Nevertheless, adolescence is a likely period for the current monograph to explore civic engagement, given that it is a period of increasing autonomy, agency, and interactions with peers and larger contexts (Larson & Angus, 2011). It is the description of these *everyday contexts* that comprise the unique contribution of this important monograph by Wray-Lake and Abrams (2020). The authors conceptualize civic engagement in a manner attuned to youth environments via *every day acts* such as serving others, the elderly, their family, caring for siblings while parents work, being a mentor; acts of bravery including disarming violent peers, refusal skills, and speaking out in whatever mediums are available. This monograph weaves a story of the ways in which youth can both engage in and disengage from their local communities. The mediums for adolescent youth to express their voices are not yet at the voting poll, but instead include the platforms of social media, rap, music, and art to express their concerns and passions. Indeed, it is immortalized by rap music icons like Nipsey Hussle, known for his stinging critique of society *and* incredible acts of charity who inspires this generation of youth. They are decrying police brutality in the Black Lives Matter movement, speaking out against gun violence in the wake of the Parkland school shooting, and calling for justice in the recent vigilante shooting of Ahmaud Arbery while jogging in his own neighborhood. These everyday acts provide an invaluable snapshot of the youth and the ways in which they actively define civic engagement in their lives.

Future prospective longitudinal research in contexts that are diverse in terms of socio-economic strata and geography could help paint a fuller picture of engagement across early and middle childhood that might be predictive of involvement in adolescence and beyond. We need to better understand the contexts that foster development. While in adolescence, fewer young people are involved in out-of-school time programs, these programs, when well supervised, offer safe spaces to learn, create, and collaborate. It is no surprise to learn that these programs are often comprised of more males given that one approach by urban mothers to monitor and manage their male children's behavior is to enroll them in afterschool programs (Jarrett, 1998). These programs vary vastly in terms of quality of supportive and engaging adult and peer interactions (Smith et al., 2017; Vandell, et al., 2018) and thus their underlying capacity to promote civic engagement. Further, we know that participation in afterschool varies across development, with about half the participants being in elementary school (44%), about one-quarter in middle school, and about one-third in high school (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Work in afterschool is particularly attuned to the degree to which young people "vote with their feet" by participating in programs that are engaging and facilitate more dialogue with peers in problem-based thinking, discovery, and actions. More attention is needed to youth programs that are developmentally attuned and the staff who serve these programs. One-third of school and community-based programs are staffed by teachers. Many of the staff are paraprofessionals who though they might be quite passionate about supporting youth, might have less background and expertise in fostering inquiry-driven civic engagement. Thus, professional development for staff in integrating civic engagement is crucial.

There are exemplars of community-based participatory research with youth that explicitly focus on allowing youth to gather information about their communities and use the data they collect to inform their own advocacy. Among the types of activities that emerge are those that help

the youth themselves lobby educational and governmental agencies for more resources and support (Ozer & Douglas, 2013). What is clear is that adolescent participation in community-based youth programming varies for reasons as wide as interest and safety. Programs that are more effective in this regard are intentional in their mission, and provide support for integrating developmentally appropriate, civic engagement.

Another strength of this monograph is that it attends to not only the everyday ways in which youth express civic engagement, but also the ways in which they are socialized across the developmental spectrum by their families, schools, and communities to be engaged. While so much of developmental research focuses upon the structural and physical aspects of homes, the monograph by Wray-Lake and Abrams points to the more interpersonal and social aspects of the home, for example, family conversations about social justice and equity, that likely contribute to young people's thinking. In work on racial-ethnic socialization, my colleagues and I have discussed the role of multiple sources that contribute to informing youth's perception of their own identity and discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006). Recent scholars (Seaton et al., 2019) propose that discrimination might propel students into certain developmental trajectories, similar to the idea that the experience of violence and structural racism might either overwhelm youth and thereby lead to disengagement *or* alternatively, might inspire them into action.

In summary, the implications from this timely piece on civic engagement among marginalized Black and Brown youth, growing up in violent neighborhoods suggest that:

- 1) Multiple theoretical models, particularly those attuned to cultural diversity, and the roles of historical, structural inequities, can inform emerging models of youth civic engagement;
- 2) We need to attend to the full range of civic engagement across strata, with attention not only to violent settings, but also to a broader range of "normative" developmental settings in which Black and Brown youth develop; and
- 3) Translational research is needed to inform developmentally appropriate practices in community-based settings that foster youth agency and civic engagement. Research demonstrates that adult support must be balanced with opportunities for youth voice and leadership. Further, work is needed to inform public policy that provides funding, support, and professional development for staff in community-based youth programs that foster civic engagement.

My thanks to these capable, informed, and caring monograph authors for continuing the critical conversations relevant to civic engagement and youth of color.

## References

- Afterschool Alliance (2014). *America after 3pm; Afterschool programs in demand*. Washington, D.C. <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/aa3pm/>
- Brittian Loyd, A., & Williams, B. V. (2017). The potential for youth programs to promote African American youth's development of ethnic and racial identity. *Child Development Perspectives, 11*(1), 29-38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12204>
- Burton, L. M., & Jarrett, R. L. (2000). In the mix, yet on the margins: The place of families in urban neighborhood and child development research. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*(4), 1114-1135. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01114.x>
- Cabrera, N. J. and the SRCD Ethnic and Racial Issues Committee<sup>1</sup> (2013). Positive development of minority children. *Social Policy Report, 27*(2), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2013.tb00075.x>
- de Brey, C., Musu, L., McFarland, J., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Diliberti, M., Zhang, A., Branstetter, C., & Wang, X. (2019). Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups 2018 (NCES 2019-038). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2019038>
- Eccles, J. S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C. M., Flanagan, C., Reuman, D., & Maclver, D. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychologist, 48*(2), 90-101. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.48.2.90>
- García Coll, C., Crnic, K., Lamberty, G., Wasik, B. H., Jenkins, R., Vázquez García, H., & Pipes McAdoo, H. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development, 67*(5), 1891-1914. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1131600>
- Hope, E. C., & Spencer, M. B. (2017). Civic engagement as an adaptive coping response to conditions of inequality: An application of phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST). In N. J. Cabrera & B. Leyendecker (Eds.), *Handbook on positive development of minority children and youth* (pp. 421–435). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43645-6\\_25](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43645-6_25)
- Hughes, D., Rodriguez, J., Smith, E. P., Johnson, D. J., Stevenson, H. C., & Spicer, P. (2006). Parents' ethnic-racial socialization practices: A review of research and directions for future study. *Developmental Psychology, 42*(5), 747–770. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.5.747>

---

<sup>1</sup> The SRCD Ethnic and Racial Issues Committee (2009-2011) was comprised of (in alphabetical order) from 2009 to 2012: Natasha Cabrera (Chair), Marjorie Jane Beeghly, Christia Brown, Juan Casas, Natalia Palacios, Jean Phinney, Monica Rodriguez, Stephanie Rowley, Carlos Santos, Emilie Smith, Mia Bynum Smith, and Dawn Witherspoon. James Rodriguez participated in the Committee as the Latino Caucus representative.

- Jarrett, R. L. (1998) African American children, families, and neighborhoods: Qualitative contributions to understanding developmental pathways, *Applied Developmental Science*, 2(1), 2-16. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532480xads0201\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532480xads0201_1)
- Larson, R. W., & Angus, R. M. (2011). Adolescents' development of skills for agency in youth programs: Learning to think strategically. *Child Development*, 82(1), 277-294. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01555.x>
- Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Bowers, E. P., & Geldhof, G. J. (2015). Positive youth development and relational-developmental-systems. In W. F. Overton & P. C. Molenaar (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science* (Vol. 1, pp. 607-651), Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/97811118963418.childpsy116>
- Mahoney, J. L., Parente, M. E., & Zigler, E. F. (2009). Afterschool programs in America: Origins, growth, popularity, and politics. *Journal of Youth Development*, 4(3), 23-42. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2009.250>
- Marsh, K., Darity, W. A., Cohen, P., Casper, L., & Salters, D. (2007). The emerging Black middle class: Single and living alone, *Social Forces*, 86(2), 735-762. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/86.2.735>
- McLoyd, V. C. (2006). The legacy of *Child Development's* 1990 *Special Issue on Minority Children*: An editorial retrospective. *Child Development*, 77(5), 1142-1148. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2006.00952.x>
- Ozer, E. J., & Douglas, L. (2013). The impact of participatory research on urban teens: An experimental evaluation. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(1-2), 66-75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9546-2>
- Petersen, A. C., Koller, S. H., Motti-Stefanidi, F., & Verma, S. (Eds.). (2016). *Positive youth development in global contexts of social and economic change*. Taylor & Francis.
- Seaton, E. K., Gee, G. C., Neblett, E., & Spanierman, L. (2018). New directions for racial discrimination research as inspired by the integrative model. *American Psychologist*, 73(6), 768-780. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000315>
- Smith, E. P., Osgood, D. W., Oh, Y., & Caldwell, L. C. (2018). Promoting afterschool quality and positive youth development: Cluster randomized trial of the Pax Good Behavior Game. *Prevention Science*, 19(2), 159-173. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-017-0820-2>
- Smith, E. P., Witherspoon, D. P., & Osgood, D. W. (2017). Positive youth development among diverse racial-ethnic children: Quality afterschool contexts as developmental assets. *Child Development*, 88(4), 1063-1078. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12870>
- Spencer, M. B., Dupree, D., & Hartmann, T. (1997). A phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST): A self-organization perspective in context. *Development and Psychopathology*, 9(4), 817-833. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579497001454>

## 7 Smith

- Vandell, D. L., Lee, K. T. H., Whitaker, A. A., & Pierce, K. M. (2018). Cumulative and differential effects of early child care and middle childhood out-of-school time on adolescent functioning. *Child Development, 91*(1), 129-144. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13136>
- Wiiium, N., & Dimitrova, R. (2019). Positive youth development across cultures: Introduction to the special issue. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 48*(2), 147-153. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-019-09488-7>
- Williams, J. L., Anderson, R. E., Francois, A. G., Hussain, S., & Tolan, P. H. (2014). Ethnic identity and positive youth development in adolescent males: A culturally integrated approach. *Applied Developmental Science, 18*(2), 110-122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2014.894871>
- Wray-Lake, L. & Abrams L. S. (2020) Pathways to civic engagement among urban youth of color. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 85*(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/mono.12415>