

Youth Sociopolitical Action and Well-Being: Costs, Benefits, and How to Support Sustainable Sociopolitical Practices

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Abstract: This Special Issue examines the links between sociopolitical action and healthy youth development. The 12 featured studies use diverse conceptual and methodological approaches to advance understanding of how the costs and benefits of youth sociopolitical action are dependent on identity, context, and structural factors. Key findings demonstrate that intersectional identities shape youth experiences of activism and that social contexts can exacerbate or buffer against personal risks, underscoring the importance of supportive environments that are attentive to each young person's experiences of oppression. The contributing authors propose pragmatic strategies to encourage mutually reinforcing associations between personal well-being and sociopolitical action, such as integrating healing-centered approaches into youth programming and contextualizing resistance to systemic oppression as a component of healthy development. This Special Issue calls for future research to refine theoretical models and develop sustainable, health-promotive strategies to support young people in their vital work to advance justice and equity.

Keywords: sociopolitical development; critical consciousness; youth activism; youth organizing; healthy development; well-being; empowerment; costs and benefits; intersectionality; supportive practices



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1. Introduction

In recent years, youth have been tasked with navigating an increasingly contentious sociopolitical landscape, characterized by widening political polarization (Tyler & Iyengar, 2023) and increasing public instances of racism and racial violence (Elias et al., 2021). Despite challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, risks of violence, and other negative repercussions, adolescents and young adults (also referred to as “youth” and “young people” in this Editorial and across this Special Issue) have stood at the forefront of movements advocating for justice such as Black Lives Matter (Kinloch et al., 2020), March For Our Lives (Bent, 2019), and Fridays for Future (Svensson & Wahlström, 2023). Young people's civic action not only is important for their own developmental outcomes (Gonzalez et al., 2020), but also positively impacts their communities and society (Christens et al., 2013). However, sociopolitical action can involve significant risks and costs for youth. Research is needed to better understand young people's developmental experiences related to sociopolitical action and to identify ways to best support their well-being.

This Special Issue explores the intersections of sociopolitical action and healthy development among adolescents and young adults. We conceptualize sociopolitical action broadly to encompass activities that challenge oppression, from participating in large social

justice movements to taking individual actions to advocate for equity in local communities. Our goal with this Special Issue is to cultivate a multi-disciplinary and multi-level conversation about how best to support young people in justice-oriented sociopolitical action that is constructive, sustainable, and health-promotive. Collectively, the authors' contributions clarify the conditions under which youth experience both the costs and benefits of sociopolitical action, including psychological, physical, social, or material impacts (Conner et al., 2023). The findings in this Special Issue extend prior understanding of how diverse youth may be vulnerable to burnout, anxiety, and physical harm, even as they also experience empowerment, sense of purpose, and social connection. As young people take action to pursue justice and equity, research that elucidates how to support their sustained sociopolitical engagement and well-being is critical.

In this Editorial, we highlight key contributions of the 12 studies included in our Special Issue. We begin by outlining the current theoretical landscape and the frameworks used by contributing scholars to explore the connection between sociopolitical action and healthy development. Next, we identify major themes that emerged, focusing on how the relationship between sociopolitical action and well-being depends on social context. Lastly, we discuss practical implications for supporting youth and suggest future directions for research. Together, the 12 studies included in this Special Issue, guided primarily by early career scholars, offer an important perspective to guide future work on civic engagement (see Table 1 for details about the papers and the contribution numbers referenced below).

Table 1. Description of papers in the Special Issue.

| # | Authors | Title | Sample Size | Age | Race/Ethnicity | Gender | Research Method | DOI |
|---|--|--|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Parissa J. Ballard, Stephanie S. Daniel, Taylor J. Arnold, Jennifer W. Talton, Joanne C. Sandberg, Sara A. Quandt, Melinda F. Wiggins, Camila A. Pulgar and Thomas A. Arcury | Sociopolitical Development among Latinx Child Farmworkers | 169 | 11–19 (Mage = 15.8) | 100.0% Latinx | 62.7% Male 37.3% Female | Descriptive and correlational analyses of data collected through community-based participatory research | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020037 |
| 2 | Alexis Briggs | Black Youth Rising: Understanding Motivations and Challenges in Young Adult Activism | 22 | 18–25 | 100.0% Black | 63.6% Female 18.2% Male 18.2% Nonbinary | Semi-structured interviews | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020043 |
| 3 | Elena Maker Castro, Brandon D. Dull, Chantay Jones and Johnny Rivera | “We Can Transform This, We Can Change This”: Adolescent Sociopolitical Development as a Catalyst for Healthy Life-Span Development | 10 | 59–75 (Mage = 63.0) | 30.0% Black 20.0% Latinx 20.0% Puerto Rican 10.0% White 10.0% Multiracial | 40.0% Female 50.0% Male 10.0% Did not state | Retrospective interviews | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020040 |
| 4 | Natalie Fenn, Alia AlSanea, Ellie McClean, Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz, Manshu Yang and Mark L. Robbins | A Qualitative Investigation of Civic Engagement and Well-Being among Non-College-Bound Young Adults | 14 | 18–24 | 14.3% Black 28.6% Latinx 14.3% Asian 35.7% White 7.1% Multiracial | 50.0% Female 50.0% Male | Semi-structured focus groups and interviews | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020058 |
| 5 | Jesica Siham Fernández, Rashida H. Govan, Ben Kirshner, Tafadzwa Tivaringe and Roderick Watts | Youth Community Organizing Groups Fostering Sociopolitical Wellbeing: Three Healing-Oriented Values to Support Activism | 7 Youth Community Organizing groups | Under 21 in 5 US groups Under 30 in 2 international groups | N/A | N/A | Ethnography, observations, interviews, and analysis of media from the organizations | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4030063 |
| 6 | Elan C. Hope, Alexandra R. Golden and Nkemka Anyiwo | Racism and Mental Health: The Moderating Role of Critical Consciousness for Black Adolescents | 604 | 13–18 (Mage = 15.4) | 91.8% Black 8.2% Biracial | 47.4% Female 52.4% Male 0.2% Did not state | Cross-sectional regression with moderation using survey data | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020044 |
| 7 | Jasmine B. Johnson, H. Shellae Versey, Natasha L. Burke and Lindsay Till Hoyt | Using an Intersectional Lens to Explore Civic Behavior, Discrimination, and Well-Being among Emerging Adult Black Women | 103 | 19–29 (Mage = 24.3) | 100.0% Black | 100.0% Female | Latent class analysis and regressions of survey data | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4030068 |

Table 1. Cont.

| # | Authors | Title | Sample Size | Age | Race/Ethnicity | Gender | Research Method | DOI |
|-----|--|---|---------------------|--|--|---|--|---|
| 8 | Amia Nash, Heather Kennedy, Michelle Abraczinskas, Ahna Ballonoff Suleiman and Emily J. Ozer | Examining the Intersection of Sociopolitical Development and Transformative Social and Emotional Learning Outcomes: An Integrated Approach in Youth Participatory Action Research | 25 studies reviewed | At least half of each study were 25 or younger | N/A | N/A | Systematic literature review | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020046 |
| 9 | Taina B. Quiles, Channing J. Mathews, Raven A. Ross, Maria Rosario and Seanna Leath | A Quantitative Investigation of Black and Latina Adolescent Girls' Experiences of Gendered Racial Microaggressions, Familial Racial Socialization, and Critical Action | 315 | 13–17 | 50.2% Black 49.8% Latina | 89.5% Female 10.5% Gender-expansive | Hierarchical linear regression with moderation using survey data | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020032 |
| 110 | J. Abigail Saavedra, Jerusha Conner, Elan Hope and Emily Greytak | Comparing the Costs and Benefits of Activism for Girls with Different Sexual Orientations and Racial and Ethnic Identities | 595 | 15–23 | 9.0% Black 7.0% Latina 42.5% White 17.0% Multiracial 24.5% Other | 100.0% Female | ANOVA with posthoc tests using survey data | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020053 |
| 11 | Christopher M. Wegemer, Emily Maurin-Waters, M. Alejandra Arce, Elan C. Hope and Laura Wray-Lake | What about Your Friends? Friendship Networks and Mental Health in Critical Consciousness | 984 | 13–18 (Mage = 16.2) | 17.3% Black 14.2% Latinx 16.4% Asian 27.3% White 23.0% Multiracial 1.8% Other | 55.0% Female 21.1% Male 23.9% Nonbinary | Social network analysis and regressions using survey data | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020056 |
| 12 | Sara Wilf, Aditi Rudra and Laura Wray-Lake | "I will still fight for it 'till the end:" Factors Sustaining Indian Youths' Climate Activism | 22 | 14–23 (Mage = 19.0) | 100.0% participants in India | 40.9% Female 54.5% Male 4.5% Nonbinary | Semi-structured interviews | https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4030078 |

2. Theoretical Grounding

In the absence of a single overarching theory that captures the implications of sociopolitical action for healthy development across diverse young people, the contributors to this Special Issue utilize a range of conceptual frameworks. Consistent with the broader field, theories of Critical Consciousness (Heberle et al., 2020) and Sociopolitical Development (Watts et al., 2003) primarily shape the conceptual landscape. Critical action is a core component of critical consciousness, alongside critical reflection and agency (Heberle et al., 2020). Drawing from Freire's (1970) work, Sociopolitical Development theory positioned action as a necessary developmental task to resist the oppression that young people from historically marginalized backgrounds endure (Watts et al., 2003).

The contributors to this Special Issue also employed theories that center contextual factors and processes that allow for deeper insight into specific connections between sociopolitical action and healthy development. For example, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1997) figured prominently across several papers, as the authors examined how overlapping identities and experiences of oppression shape youth engagement in sociopolitical action (see contributions 7, 9, and 10). Additionally, Saavedra et al. (contribution 10) and Hope et al. (contribution 6) drew on the Phenomenological Variants of Ecological Systems Theory, which contends that the risk and protective factors associated with sociopolitical action are deeply influenced by sociocultural norms and context (Hope & Spencer, 2017; Spencer et al., 1997). Other contributors, specifically Fernandez et al. (contribution 5), emphasized Healing Centered Engagement (Ginwright, 2015) as an approach to process trauma in oppressive contexts to holistically foster youth empowerment and action.

Many articles in this Special Issue simultaneously draw upon multiple theoretical models to understand the diverse and constantly evolving experiences of youth who challenge oppressive systems and advocate for justice. That is, a multi-theoretical approach may provide the necessary flexibility and context-specificity to adequately understand how sociopolitical action interacts with healthy youth development. For example, Wegemer and colleagues (contribution 11) combine Critical Consciousness (Heberle et al., 2020) with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to clarify the social linkages between sociopolitical action and youth mental well-being. Additionally, Nash and colleagues (contribution 8) combine Sociopolitical Development (Watts et al., 2003) with Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (Jagers et al., 2019) and Youth Participatory Action Research (Ozer et al., 2020) to provide insight into how initiatives can provide structure to facilitate healthy developmental outcomes for youth who engage in sociopolitical action. Fenn and colleagues (contribution 4) utilize an emerging framework proposed by Ballard and Ozer (2016), which itself is multi-theoretical as it draws on the transactional stress model and social capital theory, to explain mechanisms between activism and health.

The prevalence and utility of frameworks that apply critical perspectives to sociopolitical action may, in part, parallel a broader scholarly response to earlier asset-based theories that lacked nuanced attention to experiences of marginalized youth. For example, Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory (Lerner et al., 2005) drew attention to the role of civic engagement in fostering competence, connection, and caring and highlighted how opportunities for meaningful contribution to the community can provide young people with both invaluable opportunities for growth as well as additional responsibilities and stress (Ballard et al., 2022). However, PYD did not explicitly account for resistance and survival within oppressive systems (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Gonzalez et al., 2020). Importantly, young people can experience costs and benefits of sociopolitical action simultaneously (Oosterhoff et al., 2022), bringing up questions about what conditions might support sustainable sociopolitical action. For instance, in our Special Issue, Maker Castro and colleagues (contribution 3) applied a critical adaptation of PYD called Empowerment-

Based Positive Youth Development (Travis & Leech, 2014), which highlights the importance of youth agency to challenge and reshape oppressive structures in their particular contexts. Ultimately, the meaningful dialogue between theories in this Special Issue provides a productive foundation for theory building.

3. Costs and Benefits Depend on Social Context

A central theme of this Special Issue is the recognition that the costs and benefits of sociopolitical action are not distributed equally among youth but depend on the identities and backgrounds of those involved, the contexts of the sociopolitical action, and the interactions between these factors. In a recent review, Maker Castro et al. (2022) found divergent health outcomes associated with critical action across racial and ethnic groups. On the one hand, sociopolitical action can be a source of empowerment, offering a sense of agency, purpose, and belonging (Ballard & Ozer, 2016). On the other hand, sociopolitical action can bring about significant personal costs—both mentally and physically—particularly for youth from marginalized backgrounds who must contend with the intersecting systems of oppression that they seek to dismantle (Hope et al., 2018). Adding to the complexity, young people can experience both costs and benefits simultaneously or at different times as their sociopolitical experiences and identities evolve.

Experiences of racism (and gendered racism) permeate the daily lives of youth of color and are linked to mental health (Hope et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020; Tynes et al., 2024). In our Special Issue, Johnson et al. (contribution 7) studied the sociopolitical action of young Black women and identified three patterns of engagement: stably committed, traditionally engaged, and low engagement. Those who were consistently engaged in critical activities experienced more discrimination and had greater depressive symptoms. Quiles et al. (contribution 9) found that Black and Latina girls' experiences of gendered racism (specifically, those who were stereotyped as angry) were associated with high-risk activism for those who engaged with their families about racism. Hope and colleagues (contribution 6) found that both critical reflection and critical action together moderated the relationship between racism and negative mental health among Black youth. Those who deeply understood systemic oppression (higher than average critical reflection) without taking action to address injustices (lower than average critical action) had better mental health than others who were either unaware of oppression or highly engaged in activism. Hope and colleagues emphasized that despite the potential risks and burdens of sociopolitical action, taking action can also be a necessary survival strategy and a pathway to collective healing and justice. Their findings add nuance to recent research that suggests sociopolitical action can be a coping strategy and constructive outlet for dealing with the burdens of oppression (Conner et al., 2023) and that youth who experience racism more frequently are more likely to engage in critical actions (Hope et al., 2023).

The studies in our Special Issue highlight the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding how multiple identities shape the relationship between critical action and health. For instance, Saavedra and colleagues (contribution 10) provide valuable insight into the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. They found that youth who held a greater number of marginalized identities reported greater costs of sociopolitical action. Queer girls, especially those of color, reported higher overall costs compared to their heterosexual counterparts, including burnout and problems with family, peers, and harassment. At the same time, Quiles and colleagues (contribution 9) found that gender-expansive youth (those who defined their gender in nonbinary terms) were more likely to participate in activism. Briggs (contribution 2) interviewed 22 Black young adult activists about their motivations and challenges in activism. Among other themes, the authors describe that many participants felt motivated by their various identities to become or to

stay involved in activism in order to promote the well-being of those with shared identities. Together, these findings add nuance to the idea that the multiple identities young people hold intersect to motivate sociopolitical action and shape their experiences and well-being.

In response to calls for social science research to move beyond Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) populations (Anyiwo et al., 2020; Henrich et al., 2010), the studies featured in this Special Issue center experiences of youth of color and highlight unique cultural and contextual dimensions of sociopolitical development where little research exists. For example, Ballard and colleagues (contribution 1) examine farmwork as a unique context for youth sociopolitical development. In their sample of Latinx child farmworkers, they found civic attitudes were relatively positive, yet civic behaviors (i.e., volunteering and political activities) were relatively infrequent. They argue that sociopolitical action can potentially be a tool for health equity when youth who work on farms are provided opportunities and skills to challenge the lack of worker protections that leave farmworker health vulnerable. Wilf and colleagues (contribution 12) examined young Indian climate activists, highlighting the importance of India's unique socio-historical, cultural, and political context in shaping Indian youth's activism. Additionally, Fenn and colleagues (contribution 4) conducted focus groups and interviews with non-college-bound young adults in the U.S., who are more likely to be from lower-income households with greater mental health needs than college-attending youth. Their findings point to the value of sociopolitical activities that foster social connectedness and balance personal needs with community action to help promote positive civic development.

This Special Issue also draws attention to costs and benefits beyond the individual level (Ballard & Syme, 2016). Watts et al. (1999) described "personal and community development as two sides of the same human development coin" (p. 256), yet research on sociopolitical action has almost exclusively focused on individual-level predictors and outcomes. Wegemer et al. (contribution 11) used social network analysis to examine critical consciousness at the friend-group level. The authors found that the more critically conscious an adolescent's friends were, the greater flourishing reported by the adolescent. The study reinforces recent research that indicates social support and sense of belonging buffer against burnout from activism (Conner et al., 2023). Fernandez and colleagues (contribution 5) make explicit the role of communities in collective sociopolitical action that can provide healing for individuals and communities. As youth grapple with tensions between individual well-being and communal well-being, solidarity with peers and prioritizing collective action may mitigate the costs associated with sociopolitical action.

4. Implications for Practice and Future Research

Across the Special Issue, the authors encourage researchers and practitioners to deepen their support for young people's sociopolitical action by prioritizing healthy development and sustainable long-term engagement in critical social change. Findings from this collection of studies demand that adults working with youth co-create supportive social contexts for youth to thrive.

This Special Issue provides several suggestions for supporting young people's healthy development as they work collectively for justice and challenge systems of oppression. For example, explicitly acknowledging the connection between well-being and sociopolitical engagement may support youth well-being as they pursue sociopolitical action. Through retrospective interviews of older adults who participated in the Youth Action Program (YAP) in East Harlem during the 1970s and 1980s, Maker Castro and colleagues (contribution 3) found that intentionally recognizing that resistance against oppression is embedded within broader youth development mutually reinforced both well-being and sociopolitical development. Guided by this integrated perspective, YAP members learned to challenge

systemic structures rather than blame themselves for societal inequities, which Maker Castro et al. identified as a health-promotive practice.

Another useful approach centers healing alongside activism. Drawing on qualitative data from youth community organizing (YCO) groups, Fernandez et al. (contribution 5) identified three interconnected healing-centered values that foster well-being within YCO settings: collectivized care (including fostering a family-like environment of support and encouragement); spiritual activism (which can involve seeing yourself as part of something greater); and freedom dreaming (imagining alternatives to oppressive conditions). By applying a healing-centered framework, YCO equips young organizers with the tools to sustain activism, build solidarity, and address systemic inequities while fostering their socioemotional growth and resilience.

Finally, another promising health-promotive practice is to help young people focus on the root causes underlying the adversity they experience. In their literature review, Nash et al. (contribution 8) argued that socioemotional learning should cultivate the skills and knowledge to interrogate the root causes underlying systemic oppression to support the healthy development of marginalized youth. Structural understanding of systemic issues is a central feature of sociopolitical development (Watts et al., 2003), and studies in this Special Issue highlight the role of such critical awareness as key to healthy development.

This Special Issue challenges readers to consider not only how adults can support young peoples' contributions to societal change, but also how youth create innovative strategies to sustain their sociopolitical action in the face of adversity. That is, how do youth become aware of, and help each other maintain, sustaining and healthy practices? Youth deserve a nuanced understanding of how sociopolitical action can benefit them and their communities, as well as a clear-eyed view of the potential costs. Ideally, future research will also clarify the roles of adult allies in promoting healthy youth sociopolitical development. Elaborating and refining theoretical frameworks that are comprehensive enough to account for identity and social context, yet pragmatic enough to inform practices, will push the field forward.

5. Conclusions

The multidisciplinary nature of this Special Issue—with contributions from psychology, sociology, public health, education, and more—reflects the complexity of the topic and offers a holistic view of the factors that influence youth sociopolitical action. By examining the intersections between systemic factors, social contexts, and personal experiences, this Special Issue advances understanding of the links between youth sociopolitical action and healthy development. Yet, more work is needed. Researchers must continue to clarify the pathways through which sociopolitical action promotes positive individual and collective outcomes while also elucidating, and ultimately addressing, structural barriers to sustained and healthy sociopolitical action. Crucially, young people must be not only encouraged to engage in justice-oriented sociopolitical action, but also supported in ways that prioritize healthy development.

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