



Reasons youth engage in activism programs: Social justice or sanctuary?



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A B S T R A C T

Youth activism programs have been studied for their impact on societal change and their contribution to youth development; however, less is known about what motivates youth to engage in such programs. In this study, we draw on survey and focus group data from eight youth activism programs to understand reasons that youth attend. We find that engaging in social justice work was the highest rated reason for participation, followed closely by sanctuary, and lastly, relationships with adults and peers in the program. Analysis of qualitative data highlights the importance of sanctuary—not limited to psychological safety, but with an emphasis on celebrating aspects of identity. Findings also point to important intersections between social justice work and sanctuary, with youth expressing a desire to impact change from protected and affirming spaces that are liberating and allow them to take risks.

1. Introduction

Youth organizing or activism programs¹ engage young people in events and campaigns to promote societal improvement (Braxton, Buford, & Marasigan, 2013). Youth organizing programs can be understood from the youth development tradition, as an enhancement of youth programming with the additions of critical consciousness development and community organizing activities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Kirshner, 2015). These programs may also be understood from a community organizing perspective, as an outgrowth of social justice campaigns, which have always involved crucial—though not always visible—contributions from young people (Delgado, 2015). Similarly, we may consider youth organizing programs in terms of (a) their impact on societal change and movement building or (b) their contribution to the development of the youth who participate. Some, but not all, research on youth organizing addresses these two important aims and perspectives (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Ginwright & James, 2002; Kirshner, 2009, 2015).

However, less is known regarding youths' motivation to attend youth activism programs—and the identity-related factors at play in their decisions to join programs with social justice aims. Motivation theory (particularly in education) and research on youth decisions to attend to other types of programs and activities can certainly provide direction. For example, youth motivation to attend youth development

programs has been studied from Self-Determination Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory perspectives (summarized below). Similarly, research about the reasons people volunteer in general—and in particular, youth motivations to participate in voluntary community service—may shed some light on youth motivation to attend and earnestly engage in social justice programs (also discussed below).

Aspects of youth activism programs make them unique in this context. Unlike service learning programs, for example, youth organizing programs are structured to support youth from communities that are marginalized in leadership roles and to involve youth in addressing injustices that affect them directly (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Youth in these programs are not volunteering to help others in need; they are engaging in social justice work for themselves and others, thus their motivations to attend may be different. Relatedly, youth with social identities that are marginalized may seek a space for safety and belonging—and youth activism programs may address this motivation.

In the present investigation, we juxtapose the motivation of joining programs in order to participate in community organizing around social justice with the motivation of seeking a protected space in which to experience safety and belonging. Understanding the reasons youth participate in youth organizing programs entails more than simple decisions about what to do after school; rather, it gets to the core of these programs, their purpose, and how they relate to youth identity and development, especially for traditionally marginalized young people.

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¹ We use the phrases youth organizing programs and youth activism programs interchangeably.

This is important to understand for early adolescence, when youth program attendance is higher, to late adolescence when issues of identity and transition from school are salient.

The current study investigates eight programs in a citywide youth organizing initiative that serve as affinity groups for youth facing social adversity based on their race, gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation. The programs provide education about the identity group's past (e.g. African-American history, women's history, LGBTQ + history) and about structural inequalities in the U.S. that demonize individuals from non-dominant groups and perpetuate racial, gender, and economic oppression. These programs encourage and support early, middle, and late adolescents (depending on the program) to create and join in social change activities in their neighborhoods and schools to work against systems that further marginalize them. Many also include more traditional youth development activities like recreation, arts, field trips, and career and college readiness content. Our aim is to understand the reasons youth choose to attend and engage in these programs—with a particular focus on attending in order to participate in social justice and the separate but related reason of attending in order to find a safe and affirming space, which we term sanctuary.

1.1. Youth activism programs

Structured programs for children and youth have seen tremendous growth over the past few decades, with participation nearly doubling in the last ten years (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Over more than a century of history, the purpose of out-of-school time (OST) programs has varied widely, with goals ranging from supervision, fun, and recreation, to spiritual and civic development, to academic remediation, enrichment, and support for positive youth development (Halpern, 2003). Although evidence of the effectiveness of OST programs is mixed (Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010), studies continually find that OST programs can contribute to positive development (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). Regular OST attendance has been associated with gains in academic achievement and a host of positive outcomes (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2009; Herrera, Grossman, & Linden, 2013; Lauver, 2002; Naftzger, Manzeske, Nistler, & Swanlund, 2013; Naftzger, Vinson, Liu, Zhu, & Foley, 2014). Research suggests that these programs are likely to aid positive youth development through skill building and strong relationships with adults (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011).

Youth organizing can foster positive and productive relationships between student organizers and adult organizers where youth are able to take on more adult roles than is typical in dominant, age-segregated settings like school. In a study of primarily middle and late adolescents (M age = 16.5), Sullivan and Larson (2009) found that youth organizing programs showed promise for youth learning about the adult world, including spheres of work and post-secondary education, skills for navigating these spheres, and access to traditionally adult spaces (i.e. meetings with professionals and civic leaders set up by adult program leaders) which youth may not have been exposed to before.

Researchers have found that authentic and deeply rooted adult-youth mentoring relationships can support the academic and social development of youth from marginalized groups and communities, like African American girls and young women (Gamble-Lomax, 2016). The small group settings of youth organizing programs may lead the way to mentorship-type relationships between adults and youth who participate in youth organizing programs at a high level over sustained periods of time. These relationships can be described as “natural” mentorships because they occur outside of a defined mentorship program, under conditions of more equal power (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). Furthermore, mentoring effects may be more pronounced in a social justice activism context where collaborative partnerships between youth and adults are formed. Liang, Spencer, West, and Rappaport (2013) posit that traditional mentoring programs focus too narrowly on the interpersonal relationship within the mentoring dyad

(or group) while many problems that disadvantaged or “at-risk” youth face are the result of injustice. Addressing underlying social ecologies and problems such as historical discrimination, housing conditions, and lack of political power may facilitate positive development. Where youth-adult partnerships are built within mentoring relationships, mentoring shifts “from a ‘therapeutic’ approach in which individual youth are the targets of the intervention to a more socially transformative approach wherein mentors and youth forge collaborative partnerships that promote positive youth development at individual and societal levels” (Liang et al., 2013, p. 259).

1.2. Understanding why youth attend programs

Some of the reasons that children or youth may attend OST programs are relatively apparent. Families may encourage or compel youth to spend time in these adult-supervised settings. The need for supervision is particularly relevant for younger children—and children who join a program at a young age may continue to participate through high school. However, research shows a positive linear trend between age and autonomy in decision-making about attending OST programs such that by high school, most youth attending OST programs report making decisions about attendance for themselves (rather than parents making those decisions; Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014). Adolescents, especially during the high school years, have an increased variety of options in the OST hours, e.g. employment, self-care, sports, OST programs, socializing with friends, etc. Accordingly, Denault and Poulin (2009) found that across grades 7–11, attendance in OST programs tends to steadily decline.

Motivation theories in education provide categorizations of the relevant factors that may drive youth attendance in youth organizing programs. For example, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that humans are driven to satisfy the needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, has been used more than any other theory in studies of youth program attendance (e.g., Berry & LaVelle, 2013). Applied to youth activism programs, youth may be drawn by the social support (relatedness), the opportunity to successfully experience political actions (competence), and a sense of control of their time and perhaps the direction a program takes (autonomy). Researchers have also used Expectancy-Value theory to explain youth program attendance; for example, in a study of how adolescents (age 14–21) become engaged in art and leadership programs, Dawes and Larson's (2011) found that youth were more likely to become engaged when they found the program interesting (value) and thought they would be successful (expectancy). These broad theories provide useful frameworks, but more specific investigation is needed to understand the nuances of motivation in the particular context of youth activism programs.

A substantial scholarly literature explores the formation and life cycle of social movements, addressing a vast range of historical, sociological, and political factors. Whereas education-related motivation studies tend to consider personal and psychological processes for decision-making, the literature on social movement tends to look outside the individual to structural and societal factors. Summary of this literature is beyond the scope of this study, but several relevant findings are worth mentioning. Early theories suggested that social movements were caused in part by a group's discontent with access to things that others had, but this is not enough to fully explain activism (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Studies suggest that marginalized groups become mobilized when resources—including leaders, organizing skills, and a base constituency of interested individuals who may be mobilized for collective actions—come together (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 2002). Individuals are more likely to become activists in social movements when more opportunities for activism are open to them. Social movement organizations—including youth organizing programs—which create an institutional structure to social movements, increase the supply of opportunities for collective action (McCarthy & Zald, 2002). These perspectives suggest that structures supporting collective

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