Conceptualizing Adolescent Black Youth Political Efficacy in an Era of Crises

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ABSTRACT

Tackling adolescent youth political efficacy is indispensable to the success American democracy. Racism coupled with health and economic disparities predispose Black youth to adverse political engagement, political efficacy, and social emotional outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated pandemic-induced stressors such as the current experiences of Black youth with racial injustice and the potential of economic insecurity, homelessness, and a health disaster affecting a family member, further challenge their political engagement and political efficacy. In this theoretical piece, we therefore bring forth two separate, yet compatible theoretical frameworks, Black resilience neoliberalism (BRN) and the sociopolitical development model (SPD), to grasp the racialized identity and the political efficacy of adolescent Black youth in an era of crises.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; adolescent Black youth; politic efficacy; racial injustice; economic disparities.

INTRODUCTION

All students have been impacted by COVID-19. Yet, the pandemic has exacerbated existing societal inequities and sparked conversation regarding youth political engagement and efficacy. Tackling adolescent youth political efficacy is indispensable to the success American democracy. Racism coupled with health and economic disparities predispose Black youth to adverse political engagement, political efficacy, and social emotional outcomes (Johnson & Hinton, 2018; Spencer et al., 2003). The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated pandemic-induced stressors such as the current experiences of Black youth with racial injustice and the potential of economic insecurity, homelessness, and a health disaster affecting a family member, further challenge their political engagement and political efficacy. Mitigating factors such as a positive racialized identity coupled with a framework for understanding Black youth sociopolitical development in the current era may bring into relief how Black youth view their political self and their varied contextual experiences, thus providing a reimagining of pro-social development during times of crises (Hope & Spencer, 2017; Spencer et al., 2003; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2021).

A review of recent research on adolescent youth political and civic engagement suggests that much of the literature base focuses on multidimensional concepts like social media use and political interest (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2018; Kahne et al, 2015), civic involvement, electoral participation (e.g., Eckstein, et al. 2012; Quintelier & van Deth 2014; Vecchione & Caprara 2009), and confidence with democratic institutions (Levi & Stoker 2000). An emergent literature is bringing forth comprehensive picture on adolescent Black youth's political efficacy, particularly in times of crises (e.g., Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2021). Given how the pandemic has restructured Black neighborhoods, Black distress, and the link amongst Black people and their government, a theoretical exploration to bring into relief adolescent Black youth racialized identity and political efficacy is attractive. We believe that by critiquing adolescent Black youth racialized identity and political efficacy in an era of COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd, how this specific group outlines those socio-economic and socio-political policies and institutions encumber their capacity to meaningfully engage their communities.

In this theoretical piece, we therefore bring into view two distinct, yet harmonious theoretical frameworks, Black Resilience Neoliberalism (BRN) and the sociopolitical development model (SPD), to grapple with the racialized identity and the political efficacy of adolescent Black youth in an era of crises. This theoretical framework can serve as a way to visualize how adolescent Black youth negotiate their racialized identity and sense of societal responsibility, civic agency, and contribution to their community in trying times.

In this article, we suggest that the term Black represents one of many noticeable racialized identities in the US (Veenstra, 2009), whereas the term African American is an ethnic identity. Both are historically and contextually specific and as Mills (1998) suggests situational. The terms are not readily disentangled from one another. Black racialized identity in the US is not necessarily racialized in other countries. As such, these circumstances construct Black identification as a salient racialized identity given the diasporic nature of this population. As

adolescent Black youth in the United States undergo distinctive social positioning, societal opportunities, and treatment due to their race (Richardson et al. 2015), the study brings into relief differences in racialized identity and political efficacy. Given the promulgation of Black resilience neoliberal thought by high profile Black political actors on both sides of the aisle prior to, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, this study is timely and relevant. In the following section, we describe BRN. From there, we situate racialized identity and political efficacy in the SPD framework and discuss the value of utilizing both frameworks to understand adolescent Black youth perspectives on racialized identity and political efficacy.

Black Resilience Neoliberalism

Black Resilience Neoliberalism serves as an economic frame for countering the moralities of exclusion by employing laissez faire economic principles to promote opportunity for Black people. The moralities of exclusion describe a psychological process where majority group members view their own group as superior and position minority group members as unsuitable of moral rights and protections, linked to race and racism (Johnson & Hinton 2018). Kevin Clay (2018) coined the term Black Resilience Neoliberalism as a means to trace connections between policy discourses related to Black youth and the ways their political identity reflected social change, race/racism, and inequity. He argued that BRN captures the conspicuous and inconspicuous elements of neoliberal dialogue and reasoning, masked as empowerment. BRN then extends neoliberal logic beyond the prominent conviction that the state ought to minimally influence individual or commercial rights, and that any action beyond the state's sole legitimate purpose is unacceptable. It recognizes structural racism as a constant and conceptualizes the Black experience accordingly.

A style of post-racial, White supremacist hegemony embraced by Black leaders on the political left, like former president Barack Obama, and leaders on the right, like Ben Carson, BRN is the persistent relic of chattel slavery and the method in which it has reduced Black people as continually inhuman and Black distress as permissible (Clay 2018; see also Spence 2015). It both normalizes a caste-like racial society and valorizes Black endurance and success in light of (not despite) structural racism. However, by celebrating Black achievements this way and condemning failure to endure and overcome structural racism reinforces the power of white supremacy. BRN captures Black folks accommodating to structural racism instead of challenging the white supremacist system and its consequences (Clay 2018).

Sociopolitical Development Framework

The SPD model interrogates the character of youth engagement and those methods youth conceive of and involve themselves in politically and civically transforming society (Hope 2015; Watts & Flanagan 2007). SPD assumes that youth agency increases if they believe their efforts will lead to a positive outcome (Hope & Jagers 2014). Rubin (2007) notes an interplay between identified bias and enhanced efficacy for future political activities. Diemer and Li (2011) indicate that professed capacity to influence social and political transformation is associated with historically subordinated adolescent voting patterns. Moreover, Watts and Guessous (2006)

established that minoritized youth civic agency enabled the links between an ethical world belief and responsibility to engage in key civic behaviors in the future.

Attuned to oppression and injustice, SPD emphasizes how cultural, economic, and political systems sway society and how societal definitions influence one's public position (Hope 2015; Watts & Guessous 2006). It seeks to bring into relief how such forces move youth from inaction to a life of sustained, informed, and strategic action. Growth is often described as "knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and capacity for action in political and social systems" (Watts, et al. 2003, p. 185). For this paper, we define SPD as a mindfulness of and motivation to engage in specific civic actions or behaviors. We believe SPD may support adolescent Black youth in overcoming the sociopolitical barriers that threaten their civic engagement, thus promoting social change through empowerment.

Five Stages of SPD

SPD is divided into five stages with each focusing on critical awareness as essential for growth. Stage one recognizes the existing social order as reflecting superficial variances in group member competencies. The second stage is adaptive. Inequality is typically conceded. The system upholding this inequality is absolute. Antisocial or accommodating approaches are exercised to support a positive self-worth and the acquisition of tangible or social benefits. Stage three is where contentment surrenders to an awareness of and interest in inequality. Stage four is a desire to absorb more about inequality and conclude that efforts to transform society are necessary, particularly as it relates to injustice, oppression, and liberation. Stage five is when the knowledge and consciousness of oppression is striking. Liberation activities (community engagement and social action) is recurrent and real.

Political Efficacy

BRN and the moralities of exclusion play a role in the sociopolitical attitudes of political efficacy. The SPD model can facilitate our understanding of political efficacy by considering the prominence of BRN and the moralities of exclusion as contextual and historical factors that influence the ways adolescent Black youth comprehend and concerned themselves in pro-social political behaviors to enact transformation. Political engagement is supported by the sociopolitical outlooks of careful social analysis and political efficacy, both swayed by initial socialization experiences, including schooling and responses to the pandemic.

Research suggests that political efficacy may impact youth civic engagement (Watts & Flanagan 2007; Watts & Guessous 2006). Particularly, individuals rate their self-confidence in conducting civic actions or behaviors (Caprara, et al. 2009; Vecchione & Caprara 2009). Adolescents increasingly confront civic issues as they are introduced to civic education in schools. The inspection of diverse civic perspectives is enhanced by experiences with racial discrimination (Flanagan & Levine 2010). Dynamic external experiences and preconditions allow civic participation to develop saliently throughout adolescence (Eckstein et al. 2012).

Facets of political efficacy include social responsibility, a value position that favors the wants and needs of others (Gallay 2006; Schmidt 2012; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen 2011).

Adolescent youth societal responsibility refers to understanding the value of political and community engagement to solve community problems and alleviate social injustices prior to adulthood. Consequently, adolescent youth mirror a socially conscientious inclination for civic engagement.

Racialized Identity

The institutions and social systems crafted to maintain societal norms are rooted in racism (Johnson & Hinton 2016; Johnson 2011; see also Mills 1998). Structural racism in the US therefore portends that race and racism inform the political efficacy of Black youth. Both BRN and SPD not only operationalize racialized identity, but explain how, in this case, Blackness allows Black people to understand and act on their capacity to bring about community change. Citing Baum (2006), Veenstra (2009) notes that racialized identity categorizes "groups of people that have been socially and politically constructed as 'racially' distinct. [They] have notable cultural dimensions, but they are primarily a manifestation of unequal power between groups" (p.11; see also Mills 1998). It is not tantamount with ethnic identity, which explicitly describes culturally distinct groups (Veenstra 2009; Eriksen 2002). Comparable to ethnic identity, racialized identity is culturally and historically grounded, typified by contextual suppleness (Ahmad & Bradby 2007; Veenstra 2009). Though racialized identities entertain ethnic identity and are further fashioned by power associations (Eriksen 2002; Mills 1998), racialized identity and ethnic identity are not mutually exclusive.

Racialized identity frames how youth gauge and delineate life experiences, civic agency, and societal responsibility (Beaumont 2010; Rubin 2007; Stevenson & Arrington 2009; Youniss et al. 1997). Richardson et al. (2015) note that numerous studies advance the position that positive racialized identity is associated with academic achievement and pro-social behaviors (e.g., Ashmore et al. 2004; Chavous et al. 2003, 2008; Sellers et al. 2006). Indeed, racialized identity predicts Black youth encounters and insights of racial discrimination and shields against negative social, psychological, and academic corollaries of racism (Richardson et al. 2015).

BRN and Racialized Identity

Blackness and its relation to Black people is central to understanding BRN (Clay 2018). Rather than scrutinize how race and structural racism perpetuate state violence and other forms of Black oppression, BRN presents a contrived and oversimplified framing of the Black experience. BRN establishes structural racism as inherent and constant in society. To endure and strategically overcome structural racism serves as the one and only method for addressing oppression. Black suffering as a result of structural racism is eschewed in favor of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.

SPD and Racialized Identity

Research suggests that youth experiences with racism and historical knowledge of racial discrimination can trigger an interrogation of American ideals such as justice and liberty; similarly, it can awaken a spirit of engaged citizenship that addresses socio-economic and political inequalities (Rubin 2007; White-Johnson 2012). SPD places racialized identity at the

forefront of youth engagement. To acknowledge the intricacy of oppression allows youth to transform discriminatory surroundings for themselves and for others who are likewise oppressed (Ginwright & Cammarota 2002; Ginwright & James 2002). As youth experience a dearth of formal civic participation outlets (e.g., voting), their catalyst to harvest change is mirrored by engagement with community action groups (Watts et al. 1999), a critically oriented social justice outlook (Diemer & Rapa 2016), and an affinity toward conventional civic behaviors like serving comparably marginalized community members (Watts & Flanagan 2007).

Areas of Concern

BRN and SPD provide a cogent method for understanding the racialized identity and political efficacy of adolescent Black youth in an era of COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd as each brings into relief motivations and perspectives for why this population engages in civic and political involvement and in what way ethics and morality will structure a person's social status. Given the relative newness of BRN, few studies have investigated the racialized identity and political efficacy of adolescent Black youth. Research typically explored SPD with urban and/or low-income youth of color (e.g., Ginwright & James 2002). We hypothesize that systematic and structural racism, which have created a skewed distribution of resources, impact this population. Different sociopolitical and socioeconomic experiences of youth of color may contribute to racial variances in SPD (Quintana & Segura-Herrera 2003; Watts et al. 1999). A review of the literature suggests a jumbled portrait of Black youth civic commitment and civic behaviors. In the literature, a civic achievement gap, where Black youth across various socio-economic statuses chronicle marginally low degrees of pro-social political and civic outlooks, core civic knowledge and skills, and conventional practices of political involvement (e.g., contacting elected officials) has been noted (Levinson 2007). Alternately, contemporary research indicate that Black youth voting rates outpace their peers (Philpot et al. 2009; File 2013). Research likewise indicates that Black youth may be civically engaged via unconventional pathways including youth-driven justice-oriented movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) or contributing to politically inspired poetry and hip-hop (Baskin-Sommers, et.al, 2021 Johnson, 2017; see also Ginwright 2010; Ginwright & James 2002). Contemporary adolescent Black youth have grown up in an era that disdains Jim Crow segregation. They still, however, must navigate it's by-products such as economic distress from low wage jobs, segregated and cts of low-skill, living wage jobs, a mismatched education enterprise, and an increasingly privatized incarceration scheme based on recidivism that negatively impacts a vast majority of Black families-- – all conditions having become worse yet more visible during the pandemic.

BRN, on the other hand, does not assume that Black people will automatically respond in a critical fashion to dismantling structural racism. In fact, Clay (2018) argues that against the backdrop of privatization and personal responsibility, the over-policing of Black bodies, and the dominant rhetoric of a color-blind society, Black youth and those who research this population are more inclined to operate under the guise of Black empowerment. As Clay (2018) notes, such a façade reinforces hegemony, which requires the consent of the ruled. Utilizing both

frameworks to study the racialized identity and political efficacy of adolescent Black youth therefore becomes necessary.

CONCLUSION

Literature focused on youth civic identity development and civic engagement uncovers the possibility for diminishing the civic knowledge divide among students of color; moreover, addressing civic empowerment seems essential to the prosperity of our nation's democracy. While Americans uphold a vision of democracy where all citizens appreciate and engage in civic and political life, Black people across socio-economic levels have been systematically prevented from enacting this vision. This is especially true when examining the preparation for citizenship provided by public schools. Nevertheless, there is hope for the future. In fact, there is a considerable number of studies that demonstrate the ability of disadvantaged youth to analyze the structures and circumstances that oppress them and act toward dismantling these barriers (Ginwright & James 2002; Duncan-Andrade 2006; Noguera & Cannella 2006; Rubin & Hayes 2010; Shiller 2013). And the civic engagement in the wake of the George Floyd murder is proof of that as it demonstrated that youth of color were eager to protest and organize for change.

A participatory democracy requires an engaged citizenry, stirred to successfully meet grand challenges. Students with high civic engagement attitudes and behaviors learn more academic content (Gallini & Moely 2003). Gent (2007) contended that civic and political engagement is particular method to guarantee no youth is truly left behind. Moreover, youth who understand and value their racial identity express higher levels of school and community belonging. This paper discussed the interplay between racial identity and civic engagement attitudes and behaviors of adolescent Black youth. When researchers understand and articulate the relationship between racialized identity and political efficacy, they will put forward alternative pathways toward positive Black youth development that promote equal opportunities. As the details of civic educational practices will differ due to the variance in any given setting, reformation of such practices is necessary, nonetheless. Equitable civic learning experiences are likely to increase students' sense of personal and political efficacy and trust; thereby, creating a more democratic nation. The COVID-19 pandemic has yet again demonstrated that the urgency of the matter is now.

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