Hope, Healing, and Care

Pushing the Boundaries of Civic Engagement for African American Youth

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For young people, a diminished capacity for hope is one of the most significant threats to civic engagement

THE EXISTING LITERATURE on youth civic engagement presents two challenges. On the one hand, insofar as it fails to account for class and ethnic differences, current theory generally conceptualizes youth civic and political participation too broadly. Much of the focus is on conventional civic engagement, which Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe as citizenship through individual acts of volunteering and the like. On the other hand, insofar as it does not account for the ways in which historical, community, and social forces shape civic activities, current theory frames civic participation too narrowly. The singular focus on citizenship forms of engagement overlooks other civic activities such as protests, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience. These forms of civic engagement address issues related to injustice and are directed toward social change.

In addition to the challenges presented by the literature on youth civic engagement, a growing body of research suggests that measures used to assess traditional forms of engagement—such as volunteering at the neighborhood youth club or campaigning for a local politician—may be inappropriate for assessing civic engagement among youth in urban communities (Lang 1998; Sanchez-Jankowski 2002). Research also suggests that

urban youth have less faith in traditional forms of political engagement and may participate in civic life in ways that go unrecognized by social science researchers. These forms of participation may include activities such as addressing police harassment when traveling to and from school (Fine et al. 2003), encouraging a school to purchase new classroom heaters during cold winters, and advocating for free bus passes for transportation to and from school for students who receive public assistance (Mediratta and Fruchter 2001). Moreover, research suggests that "engagement" for urban youth may include unconventional forms such as financial assistance for family survival or artistic expression through music, art, and poetry (Cammarota and Fine 2008). These activities invite questions about what constitutes civic action among urban youth, and about the ways in which the social, economic, and political context of urban communities shapes the contours of civic engagement.

As Sullivan (1997, 241) notes, "in cities ravaged by alcohol, cocaine, heroin addictions, and the nexus of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, networks of care, support, and counseling are some of the strongest, most vibrant, and most visible civic infrastructures existing in poor communities and neighborhoods." Long-term exposure to poverty, violence, and social marginalization threatens aspects of civic life and community well-being. Over time, these forms of oppression can rupture the psycho-social fabric that forms

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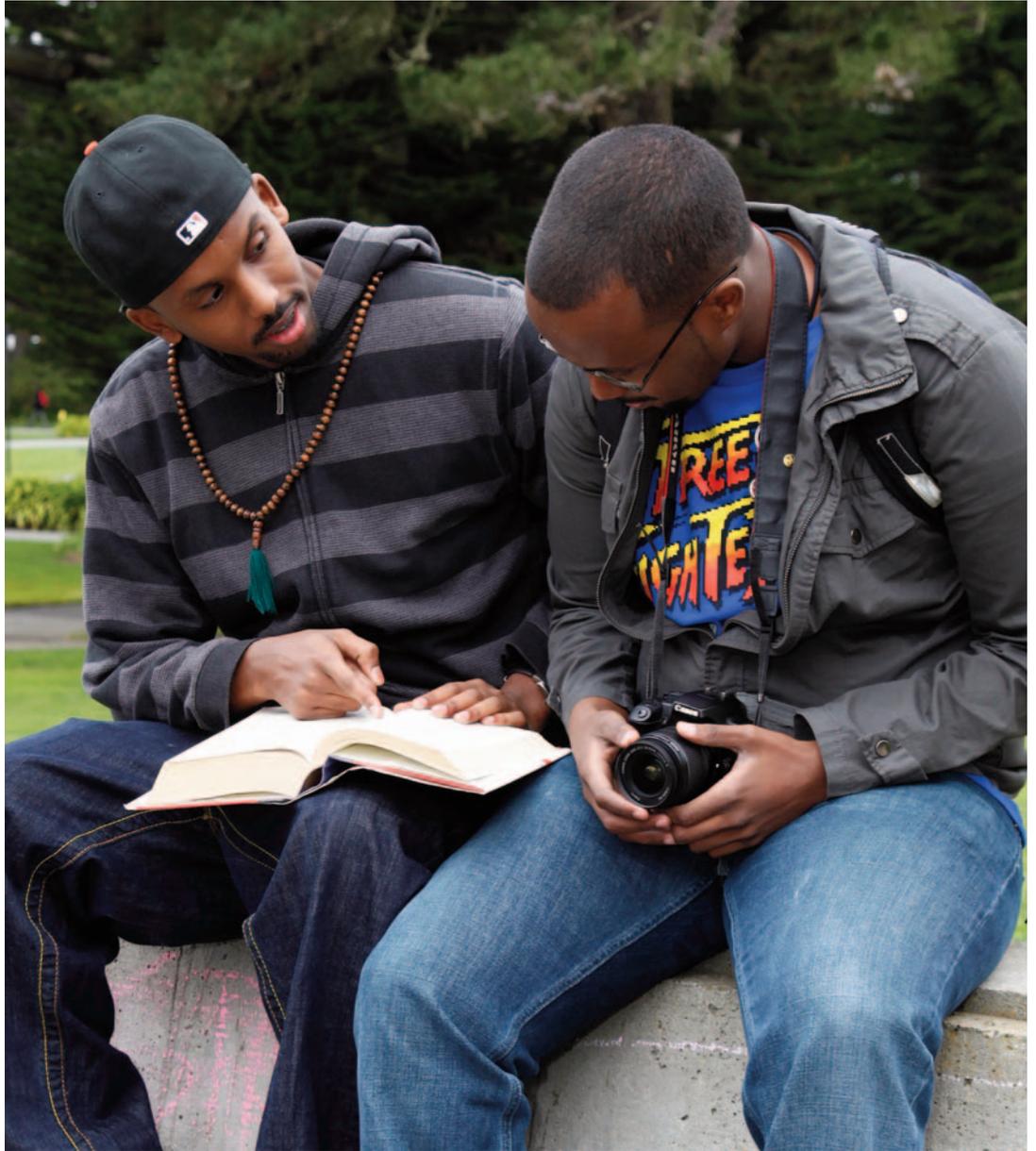
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communities of care and that fosters collective and individual well-being and purpose. These issues have in many ways threatened modes of care and justice that historically have played an important role in African American social networks and activism. Increasingly, neighborhood-based organizations in black communities have come to recognize the role that healing, hope, and care play in developing young people as well as fostering strong, vibrant community life.

Civic dimensions of healing, hope, and care

Healing is the process of restoring health and well-being to individuals and communities.

Conceptually, healing is an important dimension of civic engagement given the ways in which poverty, racism, and violence have threatened vibrant community life in black neighborhoods. Daily trauma, hopelessness, and nihilism "prevent us from participating in organized collective struggle aimed at ending domination and transforming society" (hooks 1993). Healing requires a critical consciousness, a way of understanding the social world through political resistance that prepares African American youth to confront racism and other forms of oppression. Ward (2000, 50–51) suggests that it is important to develop intimate spaces where young people "cultivate resistance

against beliefs, attitudes, and practices that can erode a Black child's self-confidence and impair her positive identity development."

The healing process fosters hope, which is an important prerequisite for meaningful civic engagement and social change. Together, healing and hope inspire youth to understand that community conditions are not permanent, and that the first step in making change is to imagine new possibilities. For young people, healing fosters a collective optimism and a transformation of spirit that, over time, contributes to healthy, vibrant community life.

By integrating issues of power, history, self-identity, and collective agency, healing rebuilds hope and political possibilities for young people. This process acknowledges the ways in which the effects of joblessness, poverty, violence, and poor education have been toxic to black communities. At the same time, this process also fosters new forms of political and community life. By rebuilding collective identities (racial, gendered, youth), exposing youth to critical thinking about social conditions, and building activism, black youth are able to heal; they remove self-blame and act to confront pressing school and community problems.

Community organizations rebuilding forms of youth civic life

Community organizations can play an important role in healing and in responding to neighborhood and community problems (Ginwright 2010). These organizations often provide opportunities for urban youth to connect with peers and adults, as well as to address pressing social and community problems. Community organizations provide young people with a sense of purpose, important relationships, and skills necessary to create neighborhood or school change. In Oakland, California, for example, both Urban Peace Movement and Leadership Excellence work with youth of color not only by supporting them as they heal from trauma, but also by organizing to bring peace to their schools and communities. In New York, Brotherhood/ Sister Sol has developed innovative strategies to support the spiritual and physical health and

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well-being of youth in Harlem. In Los Angeles, Homeboy Industries combines spirituality, mental health services, and entrepreneurialism in order to foster health and well-being among gang members.

Community organizations often provide three pathways to healing and restoring civic life in black communities. First, they provide *pathways to critical consciousness,* or to social and political awareness of the root causes of quality-of-life problems. Often, community-based organizations facilitate the healing process by developing among youth the social and political awareness that is necessary for activism. This awareness encourages young people to take action in order to address social and community problems. Critical consciousness enables youth to see the world—and to act—from the perspective of agents rather than victims.

Second, community organizations provide *pathways to action,* which compel individuals and collectives to claim power and control over sometimes daunting social conditions. Providing pathways to action involves preparing young people to address school and community issues that they wish to change and improve. Through these pathways, young people are involved in strategizing, researching, and organizing in order to change school policies, state legislation, and police protocols that create problems in their daily lives. Action pathways focus on root causes of social problems and make explicit the complex ways that various forms of oppression work together.

Third, community organizations provide *pathways to well-being.* Well-being is a result of power and control over internal and external forms of oppression (Prilleltensky, Nelson, and Peirson 2001; Watts and Guessous 2006). Building pathways to well-being requires collective power and control in order to create the conditions that foster a higher quality of life. In this sense, well-being involves a sense of purpose, optimism, hope, agency, and direction that may result in community organizing and other action to bring about social justice.

Addressing forms of injustice can contribute to a sense of well-being and to improved mental health among African American youth. Civic opportunities for young people of color, therefore, must enable youth to develop the skills

required to address the issues that affect their lives and their communities (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002; Ginwright and James 2002). These skills include the capacity for young people of color to respond to issues that they experience as unfair (Daiute and Fine 2003), for example, and the capacity for young people of color to participate and exercise agency in neighborhood and school contexts (Hegtvedt, Clay-Warner, and Johnson 2003). Scholars have also reported that a strong and positive racial identity acts as a protective factor for youth of color (Thomas, Davidson, and McAdoo 2008; Ward 2000). Janie Ward (2000, 58) notes that "addressing racism and sexism in an open and forthright manner is essential to building psychological health in African American children" who have been failed by schools, social supports, and traditional youth development programming. Similarly, Watts

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and Guessous (2006) offer a social-psychological discussion of the sociopolitical development of youth and the role of social oppression. After surveying 131 youth about their capacity to change things they believed to be unfair, Watts and Guessous found that black youth who displayed a strong belief that they could change things also displayed higher levels of mental health and youth development outcomes.

Conclusion

Issues such as joblessness, violence, and substance abuse have threatened some forms of civic life and community well-being in African American urban neighborhoods. And for young people, a diminished capacity for hope is one of the most significant threats to civic engagement. Community organizations are responding to this crisis by creating opportunities for healing through caring relationships, strong social networks, and action taken to improve social conditions. These organizations are weaving together threads of hope that, ultimately, form the fabric of civic life.

Given the vibrant role of young people in the civil rights, free speech, Black Power, and other movements, additional research is needed to provide a more nuanced understanding of the contours of activism and civic engagement among African American youth. Further, a more robust understanding of how social settings and political contexts influence civic opportunities would help explain why youth of color seem to be disconnected from political life today. Future research should unpack less-known dimensions of civic engagement by focusing on issues such as hope. Such research would expand the boundaries of civic engagement and increase investments in those civic pathways that can lead to a better quality of life for young people, ourselves, and our society. □

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