Democracy & Education

Youth Change Agents
Comparing the Sociopolitical Identities of Youth Organizers and Youth Commissioners

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Abstract

Although youth have long been at the forefront of social change, the last two decades have seen an upsurge in the number of organizations, agencies, and governmental bodies dedicated to supporting the idea of youth voice in public policy. Drawing on in-depth individual interviews with 32 youth in one major urban center, this study compares how participation in differently positioned political activities influences participants' sociopolitical identities and their views of the most effective mechanisms for social change. Specifically, this research compares youth involved in a government-sanctioned youth commission, developed to advise policymakers, with youth involved in a community-based youth organizing group, focused on fighting for educational reform. The study explores similarities and differences in the two sets of participants' civic commitments, sense of agency, and beliefs about the process of social change.

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T HE VIEW THAT today's youth are tomorrow's leaders is widespread in American society. As President Barack Obama observed in a proclamation declaring January National Mentoring Month, "Mentors are working with today's youth to develop tomorrow's leaders" (Obama, 2010). Practitioners and scholars of youth civic engagement likewise invoke the future when explaining why it is important to attend to the civic beliefs, values, and dispositions that young people form during adolescence. Levinson (2010), for example, argued that schools should provide rich civic-learning opportunities for students in order to "build a new generation of mobilized, empowered adults" (p. 337), and Flanagan (2013) justified the "youth lens" in her book *Teenage Citizens* by asserting that "examining adolescents' views provides a lens to future . . . More than their elders, youth represent the possibilities of the future" (p. 46).

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Because the political participation of youth is constrained by various factors, including age restrictions on voting, it is commonplace to view youth as citizens in training, leaders in the making; however, across the country and indeed around the world, young people are emerging as the leaders of today. They are social entrepreneurs, like Johnny Cohen, who at the age of 12 developed shields to retrofit clunky school buses, resulting in greater fuel efficiency and lower carbon emissions (Pyper, 2012). They are activists, like Sharron Snyder and Asean Johnson, who in 2013 led massive walkouts in Chicago and Philadelphia to protest budget cuts to education and spoke with clarity and passion to media outlets about the effects of these cuts (Conner & Rosen, 2013; Re-Thinking, 2013). And they are artists, like Belissa Escobedo, Rhiannon McGavin, and Zariya Allen, who challenge us to see our society in new ways (Creedon, 2015). The impact of youth's engagement in policy advocacy is increasingly being felt. For example, a recent field scan found that youth organizing victories are growing in both number and scope (Braxton, Buford, & Marasigan, 2013). The report revealed that of the 84 reported youth organizing victories in the past three years, 80% have had impacts beyond the school or neighborhood level. Most of these victories clustered in the following issue areas: "educational justice/ education reform (with 24 victories), immigrant rights (13), environmental justice (11), food justice (10) and health (7)" (Braxton et al., 2013, p. 27). From the hills of Jefferson County, Colorado, to Chile, Senegal, London, and Budapest, youth are leading the charge of social change (Ash, 2012; Coughlan, 2012; Diop, 2012; Healy, 2014, Henao, 2013). In these capacities, they demonstrate considerable leadership, civic engagement, and civic commitment *today.* Therefore, it is important to examine youth's sociopolitical views and theories of change and to understand why they act and how they act, not simply because of what their beliefs and behaviors might portend for the future of American democracy but because of the significance of their attitudes and actions now in shaping the present.

In recent years, many new organizations have sprouted up to help support and encourage youth in assuming roles as civic actors and change agents. In particular, the last two decades have seen growth in the number of organizations, agencies, and governmental bodies dedicated to facilitating youth involvement in public policy, as ideas about the value of youth voice have taken hold. As a consequence of what Kwon (2013) has called the "nonprofitization of activism" (p.45), youth are becoming more involved than ever before in advocating for legislative priorities through community-based organizing groups and organizing coalitions as well as youth councils and youth commissions. Although youth organizing has attracted the attention of scholars, comparatively little research has focused on youth councils.

Drawing on in-depth individual interviews with 32 youth in one major urban center, this study compared how participation in these two types of organizations influences participants' views of the most effective mechanisms for social change and conceptions of themselves as civic or political actors. Specifically, we compared youth involved in a government-sanctioned youth commission, developed to advise policymakers, with youth involved in a youth organizing group, focused on grassroots educational reform. We considered how the different orientation and positioning of these organizations corresponded to differences in participants' beliefs about the process of social change, civic commitments, and sense of agency—three key components of sociopolitical identity development (Watts & Flanagan, 2007), as described further below.

Two Contexts for Youth Civic and Political Engagement

During adolescence, youth navigate many different institutions— family, school, community-based organizations, media—that shape their understandings of the social world and influence their sociopolitical development. Flanagan (2013) referred to these institutions as mini-polities to draw attention to the ways in which "youth construct ideas and identities about civic membership in the macro-polity, the nation" based on their experiences in these smaller scale, mediating spaces (p. 2). Because they engage youth in direct political action, youth councils and youth organizing groups offer particularly rich sites in which to study how youth's perspectives on social change and their visions of themselves as change agents develop.

Youth Councils

As of 2007, 12 states and 140 American cities had established youth councils or commissions to advise policymakers on the impact of their legislation on youth (Martin, Pittman, Ferber, & McMahon, 2007), though many more have been formed since then (R. Gunther, personal communication, March 2015). City-level youth commissions were first introduced in the mid-1990s in such cities as San Francisco and Houston, and the first state-level legislative youth council was created in Maine in 2001. In 2012, the National Council of Young Leaders launched. This group was developed to share youth's perspectives and policy priorities with federal legislators.

Despite their growing presence, the work and outcomes of youth councils have not been well-documented, with the exception of a series of reports chronicling the accomplishments of the San Francisco Youth Commission (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2010). Although some have hailed youth councils as "a powerful way for youth to make political change" (Taft & Gordon, 2013, p. 88; see also Martin et al., 2007), others have critiqued them as tokenized efforts that do not allow youth any real voice (Conner, Ober, & Brown, in press). One recent study found that youth activists view youth councils with skepticism and tend to dismiss them as antidemocratic, elitist, and superficial (Taft & Gordon, 2013). An earlier study of youth councils, in the United Kingdom, demonstrated that youth council members themselves share some of these same concerns, often chafing against the bureaucratic structures within which they must operate, feeling powerless, and noticing the tendency of adults to co-opt and control their agendas (Mathews, 2001). Furthermore, according to research conducted by Taft and Gordon (2013), youth councils may promote social reproduction, rather than meaningful social change. In effect, youth councils "are not merely designed to empower young people to participate.

They are also designed to produce and reproduce a particular political order and particular types of citizens" (p. 89). Nevertheless, youth councils still serve to socialize and engage youth leaders in working to address important social issues. The British youth in Mathews's (2001) study did, in fact, credit themselves with some positive local outcomes, such as reduced bus fares for youth, environmental projects, and community activities designed to appeal to young people.

Youth Organizing

Youth organizing is another strategy that trains young people to engage in improving the institutions in their communities. Through workshops and public actions, middle and high school youth organizers learn to analyze the sociopolitical conditions in their communities, to identify problems as well as solutions that will better address their needs, to take collective action, and to build power to make their demands heard. At the same time, these youth develop their own capacities as leaders and challenge the public perception of adolescents as either politically apathetic or naïve, unprepared to assume civic responsibilities. Recent estimates put the number of youth organizing groups at 160 nationally, and although these groups can focus on any issue area, ranging from environmental justice to immigrant rights, a large number concentrate their efforts on education reform (Torres-Fleming, Valdes, & Pillai, 2010).

A growing body of research has found that youth organizing contributes to both individual development and institutional change. Youth organizing has been increasingly recognized as an important developmental context and a "potent learning environment" for young people of color who traditionally have been marginalized by social institutions, including schools (Rogers, Mediratta, & Shah, 2012, p. 52). Several studies have indicated that youth organizing helps participants to develop their facility with critical social analysis, as they learn to examine the root causes of inequalities and oppression (Conner, 2011; Cervone, 2001; Ginwright, 2003; Listen, Inc., 2003; Shah, 2011). Furthermore, youth organizers can acquire important civic skills and knowledge, including an understanding of formal politics as well as an understanding of the process of social change (Rogers et al., 2012, p. 52), and they can develop strong sociopolitical identities as a result of their involvement (Conner, 2011; Kirshner, 2007; Mira, 2013; Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

At the same time that it fosters learning and leadership among youth, youth organizing foments social change. Youth organizing has emerged in recent years as a powerful strategy in education reform. Numerous studies have documented how youth organizing groups have achieved political and institutional change (Conner, Zaino, & Scarola, 2012; Kwon, 2006; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Shah & Mediratta, 2008; Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe, 2008; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & Camino, 2008). Youth have led and won campaigns to replace out-of-school suspensions with in-school suspensions, to rewrite districts' student codes of conduct, to establish health centers in schools, and to institute race and social justice courses in schools (Braxton et al., 2013); however, like youth commissions,

youth organizing groups may face challenges, such as perceived cooptation or manipulation by adults (Conner, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework integrates two different conceptual models: Watts and Flanagan's (2007) model of sociopolitical development and Westeminer and Kahne's (2004) "kinds of citizens" framework. The first model highlights the value of focusing on commitment, agency, and theories of change as key elements of sociopolitical identity development, while the latter framework helps us to conceptualize how the organizational contexts of a youth commission and a grassroots organizing group might matter to the youth participants' sociopolitical development and outcomes.

In their theory of sociopolitical identity development, Watts and Flanagan (2007) identified four critical components: *societal involvement behavior* (the primary outcome of interest), which shapes and is shaped by *world view and social analysis*, and a *sense of agency* and *opportunity structure*, which each moderate the relationship between worldview and societal involvement behavior. Watts and Flanagan explained that "world view and social analysis" include critical consciousness—that is, the inclination to examine the root causes of social problems and move beyond attributing such problems to the "shortcomings of individuals" to consider the "influence of ineffective or oppressive social institutions" (p. 785). We extend their definition of social analysis to include young people's thoughts about how these problems can be solved. We refer to this as young people's theories of change. Agency, in Watts and Flanagan's model, is defined as empowerment and efficacy, and opportunity structure as "the availability of meaningful and desirable opportunities for action" (p. 786). Watts and Flanagan noted that there are many factors that limit or facilitate youth's access to these opportunities, including disparities based on socioeconomic status. They did not explicitly consider how the opportunities themselves might differ in quality, pedagogical approach, or political orientation; however, they did propose three different types of opportunity structures: traditional community service; conventional political work in local, state, or national organizations; and sociopolitical activism, which includes community organizing and other forms of extra-institutional action. This study focuses on the latter two types.

Certainly, there are many methods of socializing and engaging youth as leaders, and opportunities for youth to become involved in policy deliberations and decision making can differ along a number of dimensions: some opportunities will be more social-justice oriented, democratic, and empowering than others. A useful framework for distinguishing these aspects of opportunity structures is Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) "kinds of citizens" framework (see also Westheimer, 2004). Westheimer and Kahne argued that most civic programming, whether situated in schools or in community-based organizations, is designed to promote one of three types of citizens: the personally responsible, the participatory, and the justice oriented. They explained that the personally responsible citizen contributes food to a food drive, while a participatory citizen helps to organize the drive, and a

justice-oriented citizen explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes. These three types of citizens are based on different assumptions about how social problems can be addressed and society can be improved. Where the personally responsible citizen places stock in individual character traits, including abiding by the laws of the land, the participatory citizen believes that solving social problems requires people to "actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures" (p. 240). In contrast, justice-oriented citizens believe that addressing social problems requires changing "established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice" (p. 240). While participatory citizens often work within the bounds of socioculturally supported political structures, justice-oriented citizens tend to interrogate and challenge these boundaries in their efforts to address root causes of injustice. Westheimer and Kahne's framework is helpful in thinking about how the citizenship orientation of a program designed to promote youth leadership and foster youth involvement in public policy shapes participants' beliefs about how social change happens.

Because youth councils are established within existing conventional political structures, they seem to be more in keeping with the participatory citizenship model, while youth organizing programs, which stage actions as direct challenges to policymakers' approaches and agendas, seem to be more aligned with the justice-oriented citizenship approach. Furthermore, root cause analysis is a key piece of the political education in which many youth organizing groups engage their members (Conner, 2014; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). As a result, we expected that our data would confirm that youth councils promote participatory citizens whose theories of social change assume the importance of existing political systems and that youth organizing groups promote justice-oriented citizens whose theories of change involve critical systems analysis.

Methods

To address the question of how the theories of change espoused by youth commissioners and youth organizers differ, we used an embedded comparative case study design. Embedded case studies are those with primary and secondary units of analysis (Yin, 2003). In this study, we were interested in exploring variation and consistency in individual level responses (the subunits) within and between two different organizations (the main units). Because the two organizations were chosen based on the difference in their positioning as institutional and "extra-institutional" bodies (Warren & Kupscznk, 2014, p. 4), the two-case design enables theoretical replication rather than direct replication, to the extent that the findings support the hypothesized contrasts (Yin, 2003, p. 54).

Background and Site Selection

Additional sampling criteria guided the selection of the two case study sites. Although they differ from one another in terms of the ways in which they engage youth in policy and social change, they share common elements. For example, both are located in the same large East Coast city, which we refer to as Big City. This shared location means that the young people involved in each group contend with the same civic and educational issues, among others, facing their local community. Another common element is that both organizations are youth-led, meaning that the youth decide on the course of action for the organization, implement the chosen strategies, and evaluate their success.

Youth commission. The Big City Youth Commission (BCYC) was created through an initiative on the 2007 Big City elections ballot and overwhelmingly approved by the citizens. It was established to "advise and comment to the Council, the Mayor, agencies and departments of the City on proposed ordinances, other legislative matters and policies which are of concern to the children and youth of the City" (Big City Charter, Chapter 12). The commission is composed of up to 21 members, each of whom must be between the ages of 12 and 23 and a resident of the city at the time of appointment. Each of the 17 city council members may appoint one commissioner while the mayor may appoint four. Commissioners serve one-year terms, face no term limits, and are intended to represent the diversity of Big City's youth.

Since 2007, BCYC has never had the full complement of 21 members that it is allowed, and it has had three different executive directors. It has worked on policy or programming in the following issue areas: the city budget; health (sexually transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy); summer employment for youth; education and violence prevention; tax credit for internships; and voter registration. Youth commissioners have testified in front of city council about various initiatives, such as the benefits of youth courts, and they have partnered with city agencies, as well as local coalitions, to draw attention to issues facing youth. At the time of this study, they had not yet proposed, written, or sought sponsors for legislation (Conner et al., in press). In addition, at the time of the study, no set curriculum, political education, training, or induction programs had been developed for or by the commissioners. Meetings, which occurred once a month in city council chambers, tended to last two hours, and meeting agendas were set by commissioners, working in consultation with the executive director. Standing committees, including the education committee, the public safety committee, the health and recreation committee, and the economic development and workforce preparedness committee also met monthly.

Youth organizing program. Students for Equity (SFE), which serves as the second research site for this study, was founded in 1995 by a group of students who were concerned about the quality of education they and their peers were receiving in Big City. Since then, SFE has established chapters at seven high schools and attracted hundreds of members. The organization's focus is on building young people's collective efficacy and empowering youth to effect change within their communities, specifically in the context of education reform. However, SFE simultaneously emphasizes the development of individuals' social, academic, and leadership potential, recognizing that broad social change requires both collective initiative and individual leadership (Rosen, 2014).

Students for Equity is open to all middle and high school students in Big City, and there are no prerequisites for joining. Members work at the school level, through their chapters, as well as

at city, state, and national levels to press for educational change. Their campaigns have addressed such issues as school funding, teacher equity and effectiveness, and privatization, and SFE members have used both conventional and new organizing strategies, including rallies, testimonials, street theater and movement music, to bring about change in school, district, and state educational policies (Conner & Zaino, 2014). A Youth Leadership Team, made up of two members from each school chapter, coordinates these campaigns and runs weekend trainings for student members.

From its founding to the time of this study, SFE has had two executive directors. SFE's curriculum has long been designed to liberate and empower youth, to develop their collective efficacy, and to build their capacity to understand, critically analyze, and change the education system through organizing; however, in 2006, a newly hired curriculum director worked with the youth to develop and introduce new workshops, such as workshops on consumerism and the spiral of oppression, while updating the canonical workshops that had been developed by the youth founders of SFE, such as the Ideal School workshop. While these changes were initiated by adult staff members, the youth of SFE continued to be in charge of facilitating the political education workshop and directing the focus of the organizing work.

Participants
Ten current and former youth commissioners and 22 former SFE members participated in in-depth, semistructured individual interviews. We relied on key informants and used snowball sampling techniques to identify respondents in each organization. The BCYC participants included nine males and two females, and they ranged in age from 17 to 22. None had been more than three years removed from BCYC. Five participants identified themselves as White, four as African American, and two as Asian or Indian. The SFE participants included 12 females and 10 males. Ten of the SFE participants self-identified as African American or Black, 9 described themselves as White, two described themselves as Asian, and one self-identified as biracial. They ranged in age from 18 to 26, and most were between five and eight years removed from their SFE experience. One of the male students of color was involved in both SFE and BCYC and was interviewed two times.

Data Sources and Evidence
This study drew on individual in-depth interviews with the participants described above. Participants chose the location of the interview, which was most typically a coffee shop, office space, or park. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and most interviews lasted an hour. Although this study is derived from two larger research projects, which involved the collection of field notes and artifacts, interview data were selected as the basis for this study because interviews are considered an effective method for exploring individual's personal perspectives and sense making in a safe, low-stakes context (McMillan, 2012).

Interview protocols were designed to elicit the participants' views about their current and former levels of civic and political engagement, their motivation for participating, the causes that most concerned them currently, their present beliefs about social change, and other topics. Although the interview protocols for the two groups differed slightly, because they were used in larger studies, both protocols included the same questions posed early in the interview:

- What issue or problem in your community, the nation, or the world do you care about most?
- How, if at all, are you currently working to address that issue?
- In general, do you believe that you will be more effective at creating the kind of change you wish to see with regard to [that issue] by working from inside the system or outside the system?

These common questions provided the touch-points for the comparative analyses of respondents' expressed commitments, feelings of agency, and theories of change; however, the entire transcripts were analyzed for additional evidence of respondents' sociopolitical identities.

Data Analysis
To make sense of the data, we employed an iterative analytic process known as theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved several rounds of both focused and open coding. During initial rounds of coding, we developed matrices and charts, which facilitated constant comparison across interviews, enabled us to track emergent patterns in the data, and allowed us to discuss and resolve discrepancies in our interpretations of the data or applications of the codes. Over the course of several meetings, we then identified the most prevalent and meaningful patterns as themes; however, we remained mindful of outliers and evidence that ran counter to a proposed theme or proposition. We wrote both reflective and analytic memoranda to articulate and refine initial propositions, to examine the role of disconfirming evidence, and to map our themes to the theoretical frameworks (Charmaz, 1983; Strauss, 1990). Finally, as a validity check, themes and initial findings were shared with a smaller subset of interested participants as well as with the adult facilitators from the two research sites to ascertain the extent to which our findings rang true.

Results
Sociopolitical Identities: Commitment and Agency
With respect to their civic commitments and their sense of agency, the youth commissioners and the youth organizers did not differ markedly. All the respondents could identify a cause or an issue in their community that they cared about deeply, and of those who were asked, most indicated that they were working to address that issue currently. All expressed concern for others and a desire to improve the situations of others. They largely demonstrated what Watts and Flanagan (2007) would call "societal involvement" (p. 785) marked by their expressed commitment and attendant behavior.

All of the respondents saw themselves as agentive in their roles as youth commissioners or youth organizers, and all could point to specific accomplishments they and their peers had achieved through their involvement in the group. Although the youth commissioners generally described a more frustrating experience than the youth organizers, who universally spoke about their time in SFE as empowering, virtually all participants described themselves as leaders and as "change makers." For example, one youth commissioner observed that "we [youth commissioners] have the ability and the credibility at this point to make legislative changes and to suggest ideas and to get them done." Feelings of civic efficacy and identities as change agents were also pronounced among the youth organizers. One former youth organizer explained that SFE "has had an incredible effect on my life as a critical thinker and as a socially aware person who feels empowered to make change." Another reflected:

I'm committed to being a forceful leader in my community and somebody that will lead change. I'm committed to that and I feel like that's what SFE does for all of its members—[teaches them] to lead change, positive change.

Despite many similarities in terms of their expressed sociopolitical involvement and agency, differences between the two groups of respondents did start to emerge when we drilled down further to compare their worldviews and social analysis: what it was that they wanted to change and how they believed they could best engage in the change process.

Social Analysis: Perspectives on Social Change
What needs changing. As mentioned above, all participants were able to identify issues around which they would like to effect social change. Most of the youth commissioners (50%) identified "general youth issues" as their major concern; 30% specified educational issues, 20% pointed to issues of poverty and oppression, and one highlighted neighborhood safety and the attendant issues of guns, drugs, and violence. The most popular issues for former youth organizers were tied, with 55% identifying educational inequity and 55% identifying poverty and oppression. In addition, 14% pointed to environmental issues, and 9% cited one of the following concerns: general youth well-being issues, neighborhood safety, relations between Israelis and Palestinians, and health care. Each of the following issues was discussed by one former youth organizer as well: food security, LGBTQ rights, and the proliferation of casinos in urban centers.

In general, the former youth organizers were more likely than the youth commissioners to discuss specific issues of concern and to frame these issues in structural or systemic terms, while the youth commissioners tended to speak more broadly about general youth issues. Illustrative of this claim, a former youth organizer said:

I care about education because . . . if everyone had a quality education, we'd be a step closer to ending poverty . . . It's hard to say what issues because all of them are very much connected. The

education system has failed so it feeds people into the criminal justice system, and the criminal justice system has failed [to transition former inmates], so it pushes people deeper into poverty, so all of these things play off each other.

This participant mentioned the enmeshment of the educational system, the criminal justice system, and poverty. The participant's comments suggest an understanding of the "school-to-prison pipeline," a theory that argues that educational policy and practice conspire to push low-income students of color out of schools and into the criminal justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003). This theory illuminates how social systems work together to reinforce and reify social structures, like class.

Posed with the same question about what issue in their community most concerned them, youth commissioners were less likely than the youth organizers to identify structural or systemic problems. One representative response follows:

To be a little vague, the most important thing is to really raise our children in a positive and effective manner . . . I think a lot of kids need guidance and they just don't have that . . . I think it's important for adults to have conversations with youth in the city . . . just to be there for them, to guide them through life.

Similarly, another youth commissioner said:

Anything relating to children really affects me most . . . I think it is especially important to care for the youth and try to make a difference here. I mean we see startling statistics everyday about what is going on with youth in this city.

This respondent went on to discuss rates of high school dropout and rates of sexually transmitted diseases among the city's adolescents. Many, though certainly not all, youth commissioners shared the above respondents' tendencies to focus on what the city's youth lack, need, or do wrong, rather than on how the institutions in their communities adversely impact them. Although their responses do evidence commitment to community improvement, the youth commissioners did not often consider the underlying systemic problems that contribute to these issues. More often, youth commissioners' responses showcased their belief in individual agency, such as one youth commissioner who cited youth apathy as an impediment to change. This commissioner stated that "a lot of kids just aren't interested, that's probably the biggest thing. They don't see what we can do [because of] the[ir] apathy." This youth commissioner attributed a lack of greater involvement in youth council initiatives to youth apathy, without analyzing the root causes of that apathy, such as disillusionment with the current legislative body, inability to participate because of institutional barriers, or disparities in access to civic knowledge.

The distinction between the youth commissioners' and the youth organizers' analysis of social problems is captured well in a quotation from a respondent involved in both groups:

In terms of the youth commission or citywide student government . . .

a lot of people in those groups have this framework or this way of thinking that says, "OK, there's a temporary fix," not even a temporary fix but that "There's a fix to a problem and it's just that problem. We're just going to address this one issue or this one problem." And it's like, you can't think like that. You have to address it systematically. And it's not about blaming people. It's not blaming students or parents or community members, one race, or one gender. It's about holding everyone accountable and holding the system accountable because the system is what's been doing that to people. The system is what's been doing this for so long. So, it's not right to blame people, but it's about blaming the system that runs it.

This respondent highlighted two key differences in the frames of analysis he felt the youth commission and SFE promoted. One difference concerns thinking of problems in isolation versus conceptualizing them in relation to each other. A second difference has to do with rooting blame in individuals versus locating blame in a system that perpetuates social problems, like oppression, poverty, and inequity, by trying to apply quick fixes to individuals rather than generating robust social reform.

In summary, the commissioners' analysis of social problems aligned with Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) account of participatory citizenship. The problems they identified were largely problems of attitudes, values, and life choices rather than problems associated with structural deficiencies or, as one youth organizer put it: "the systems that screw up peoples' lives." The youth organizers, by contrast, with their attention to systems-level analysis of issues, modeled Westheimer and Kahne's description of justice-oriented citizens, who interrogate the root causes of social problems, frame youth issues in terms of individuals' life chances as shaped by the systems in which they live, and consider how systems can be changed to promote greater social justice (Westheimer, 2004). This type of analysis is also consonant with Watts and Flanagan's (2007) descriptions of critical consciousness and their account of the difference between "a micro view" that faults individuals and "a macro view" (p. 785) that blames the system.

How to effect change. Two primary themes surfaced in participants' comments about how to bring about social change. First, stimulated by the question, "Do you believe that you will be more effective at creating the kind of change you wish to see with regard to [that issue] by working from inside the system or outside the system?," participants discussed the differences they saw in working from the inside and the outside, with *system* left to each participant to define. A second emergent theme in the data involved framing change processes as either individual exercises or collective activities.

Insider and outsider strategies. In response to the question of how to effect change in the issues that most concern them, participants offered three types of answers. Thirty-one percent indicated a preference for working inside the system, while 19%, all former youth organizers preferred to work outside the system. Meanwhile, 50% acknowledged that social change would require efforts from both system insiders and system outsiders. Of the former youth organizers, 18% favored working inside the system, while 27% favored working outside the system, and 55% identified both

strategies as critical. Of the youth commissioners, 60% chose working as an insider, and 40% explained that social change would require efforts from both system insiders and system outsiders. No youth commissioners believed that he or she would be most effective by working from outside the system only. Many of those who recognized the importance of a joint approach to social change that includes both insider and outsider efforts also acknowledged that they are now more inclined to pursue change as an insider than as an outsider. Indeed, 50% of all the "dual approach" responders indicated this insider preference, while the other half did not necessarily choose a side for themselves.

These numbers tell two interesting stories. First, it becomes clear that the youth commissioners in this study have faith in the system and believe that meaningful social change can be generated through governmental channels. Rather than making them disenchanted with government or cynical, their experiences as commissioners seem to have fortified their conviction in the power of policy. None believe they can bring about change by working solely from outside the system.

Second, although the sizeable percentages of youth commissioners and youth organizers who championed both insider and outsider efforts is intriguing, perhaps even more striking is the relatively small number of former youth organizers (just over one-quarter) who indicated a preference for working only as outsiders. Organizing has been characterized as an extra-institutional (Warren & Kupscznk, 2014) or outsider strategy, as it seeks to build the power of people to join together to pressure those on the inside, those with decision-making power, to change policy and practice (Mitra & Kirshner, 2012). Though some argue that organizers are ultimately trying to get inside and gain a seat at the table (Schutz & Miller, 2015), others point out that organizing works from "outside of conventional institutions" to exert influence on inside decisionmakers (Watts & Flanagan, 2007, p. 788; see also Corning & Myers, 2002). Despite the orientation of SFE as an extra-institutional organization, 72% of the former organizers did not see working exclusively from the outside as either sufficient or as the right course of action for themselves, and indeed many who favored a joint approach spoke of their personal preference for insider positioning. While this finding might make sense if the youth organizers experienced their work with SFE as ineffective or inefficient, the opposite is in fact true. All of the former youth organizers identified significant "wins," changes in policy and practice, which they had helped to bring about during their time with SFE. Meanwhile, although most of the youth commissioners critiqued BCYC for not yet living up to its mission of injecting youth voice into policy deliberations (Conner et al., in press), they retained their allegiance to the system and their belief in the government as an effective vehicle for social change. This finding was surprising in that the nature of their experience in the organization as either frustrating or empowering did not seem to influence their own sense of civic or political efficacy, nor did it seem to have clear bearing on the strategies they believe lead to social change.

One reason so few youth organizers might have expressed a preference for an outside-only approach to social change is that

many recognized SFE itself as both a system insider and a system outsider. Because it is composed of students, SFE can be said to offer the ultimate insider perspective into the lived experiences of youth. Its members are the educational system's primary stakeholders. At the same time, because SFE, as a nonprofit organization, exists outside of district auspices, it is viewed as an outsider, a group that monitors the system and holds its leaders accountable. Because some SFE members felt that they occupied positions as both insiders and outsiders while working with SFE, they continued to see the wisdom of using a joint approach to social change. This explanation also tracks with some views on grassroots community organizing as a strategy that attempts to balance outsider and insider approaches in order to effect lasting change (Conner & Zaino, 2014).

Individual versus collective frames. Though it may appear from the above discussion that youth organizers and youth commissioners are more similar in their preferred approaches to social change than they are different, the ways in which they framed their understandings of social change exposed a key difference at the group level. The two groups of participants framed the power to effect change in decidedly different ways. For the youth commissioners, this power meant being positioned to make decisions or influence decisionmakers, whereas the youth organizers tended to discuss power as emerging from collective action, from groups of people working together to press for change. Youth commissioners tended to adopt individualistic frames when talking about the power to create change, while youth organizers tended to employ collective frames.

Many youth commissioners voiced the belief that influence comes from access to the instruments and agents of power. In fact, the view that insider access to power made it easier to create or compel change was especially pronounced within this group. In explaining his preference for an insider-only approach, one youth commissioner suggested that the system conferred clout and credibility:

People take you a lot more seriously if you're coming from inside the system . . . And I think you have a lot more say coming from inside the system. Coming from the outside, you can bring your ideas to the table, but they won't always be implemented.

Another echoed, "I think in general you want to be on the inside . . . If you have direct access to decisionmakers on a regular basis, you have a greater chance of having an influence on decisions that are made." And a third similarly reflected, "Working inside the system is definitely the way to go. You can speak directly to legislators. By working outside the system, it is much harder because you are not really tapped into the network that is creating the legislation." These respondents understood that access facilitated influence, and it was easier to simply receive access through one's job and network than to have to fight for it from the outside.

In addition to framing power in terms of access and authority, the way in which many youth commissioners discussed their work reflected their focus on the power of the individual. For example, as one commissioner discussed his work to pass a voting-age bill, he

stated, "I made that my goal, and I almost single-handedly got the bill passed." Another commissioner described her own struggle to garner recognition for her causes within BCYC: "I had a passion for community work, but I was in the dark for the first year, so I literally had to step out myself and run for this position . . . just to even get what I want to be done [on] the commission." This commissioner's perspective is particularly salient because it illustrates the institutional culture in which individual leaders on the commission make decisions and then work alone, rather than relying on collaboration or consensus among all those within the organization.

Finally, a number of commissioners specifically mentioned their ties to influential individuals within the city government as being essential to effecting change. One commissioner described his efficacy as partially due to his "allies in the city council. If I need[ed] a bill to get passed, I know I used to be able to go to [names of four adults in city government.]" Another commissioner stated, "A lot of my success in integrating the youth commission into the bureaucracy came from my contacts within the city. Having my dad be the [key political appointment] wound up helping immensely, because he could put us in touch with people who would guide us through the ins and outs of the city." This commissioner's experience, while seemingly insular, reflects the organization's view that powerful connections are integral to creating change. These perspectives illuminate themes present in many of the youth commissioners' interviews: individual achievement, power as positioning, and self-reliance as key drivers of change processes.

While youth commissioners conceptualized the power to effect change as an individual accomplishment based on access—"it's who you know"—the youth organizers expressed the belief that power derives from collective direct action: "it's what we can do together." Many of the youth organizer respondents voiced the beliefs that power comes from people joining together and social change depends on collective efforts. One explained that community organizing "help[s] people realize their power and to have the skills to act together . . . [because] changes that have happened in our society often require partnerships with people coming together." Another former youth organizer, who believed that she would be more effective at bringing about social change by working from inside the system, insisted on the need for collective action: "I know that it takes a group of people to make change." A third, who similarly believed that she would be more effective if working from the inside, said, "I guess with crime, violence, poverty, all of those things, I think that they could be fixed if there was more solidarity." She went onto discuss the need for people to come together in a "common struggle" that would unite them, echoing sociological notions about the importance of bonding social capital and demonstrating the application of collective frames to social change efforts.

Of the six youth organizing respondents who favored outside-only strategies for social change, five spoke passionately about the power of solidarity and its importance to social progress. As one explained, "Any meaningful change that happens here or anywhere else in the world is only accomplished through outside

organizing, through people who are completely marginalized . . . joining together and forcing the system to change." He went on to argue that "no matter how much money they make or how much influence they use to affect our lives, they don't have anywhere near as much power as the people do when they're united." The contrast he drew between individual and collective power reflects the subtle differences in the ways the youth commissioners and the youth organizers tended to speak about power and social change, with the former being more inclined to speak about individual efforts, accomplishments, and influence, and the latter being more inclined to speak about working to empower others or working in concert with others to bring about a more equitable society.

Factors that Shape Perspectives

The differences in the organizational ethos and institutional strategies of SFE and BCYC may account for some of the differences in their members' use of individual and collective frames to the extent that success in conventional politics is traditionally valued as an individual accomplishment that can result in reelection, rather than a pursuit that encourages the types of consensus building, coalition work, and collective action strategies that are so fundamental to community organizing. However, differences in organizational identities and core strategies only partially explain the difference in respondents' preferences for insider, outsider, or joint approaches. Other individual and situational factors surfaced in the data to help explain these somewhat surprising preferences. These include the alignment between the participant's personal dispositions and change strategies and the participant's perception of the relationship between the issue and the change strategy. Both of these factors are discussed in more detail below.

First, personal dispositions seemed to matter in some respondents' expressed preferences for pursuing change as insiders. One former youth organizer who saw a need for both insider and outsider approaches to education reform explained her choice to work as a systems-insider teacher by saying, "I think it's a great fit for me, with my personality." A youth commissioner who likewise acknowledged that both insider efforts and outsider efforts would be necessary to effect change in the issue he cared about most reflected, "Working within governmental institutions to effect positive change is just something that I've always been interested in, just because I think my temperament lends itself to crafting policy." While this response might reflect the selection bias that possibly attracted certain youth to the commission, it does not explain why the predispositions of youth commissioners might be reinforced by their experiences, while those of youth organizers (who presumably would be more attracted to the idea of working outside the system to pressure it to change) would not be.

A second pattern in the data suggested a relationship between the issues of concern the respondents selected and their perceptions of how they could effect change in this issue area. For example, many of the youth organizers who talked about wanting to reform education hoped and planned to work as teachers. They recognized that, in such a capacity, they would be working from inside the system to bring about change. Another youth organizer who saw the system itself as the main problem said he would be more effective working from inside it "because in that way you have to talk to people and kind of convince them . . . that this is not how it's supposed to be . . . This is how it is, and this is how it's supposed to be." He went on to discuss the importance of changing insiders' understanding of the root causes of social problems and their analytical frameworks. Some of the youth organizer respondents framed their insider approach preference in slightly devious terms as they expressed the desire to infiltrate the system in order to change it.

As mentioned above, youth organizers were more likely than youth commissioners to see a need for systemic reform. Although many youth organizers expressed a strong lack of trust in the system, only 27% thought they could reform the system from the outside alone. Within this group, critiques of the system were especially pronounced. For example, one former youth organizer drew an analogy to car repair. He explained that you can continue to tinker and replace parts here and there, but eventually "the parts just become outdated and useless, and you wind up buying a new car, which to me, is bringing in a new form or a new system." He continued, "Essentially, the system is flawed. It's got a lot of busted up parts and we just need to bring in a new type of system." Such potent critiques of the system were largely absent from the youth commissioners' interviews. A couple of youth commissioners did acknowledge that "the system's not perfect." Most, however, shared the view of one commissioner who stated, "Despite its flaws, I believe the system as a whole works towards positive change." Where youth commissioners saw the system as "a powerful force for change," youth organizers tended to believe that the system needed to be changed—and many hoped to play their part either by working from the inside-out or by putting forward alternative visions that would lead to overhauling the current system.

Discussion

In summary, though all of the respondents could speak about social problems they were committed to addressing and all saw themselves as efficacious civic actors, as leaders, and as change agents, some key themes distinguished the ways in which the former youth commissioners and the former youth organizers spoke about the topic of social change. The two groups differed in their views of what needs to be changed, with the youth commissioners tending to focus on people's life choices and the youth organizers on people's life chances. The youth organizers saw a greater need for systemic reform and overhaul than did the youth commissioners, who largely expressed greater confidence and trust in the system. They also differed in the range of tools they described for effecting social change, with youth commissioners concentrating on policy and programming and the youth organizers entertaining a broader repertoire of strategies, including empowering others through education, engaging collectively in direct action, building relationships and challenging and dispelling stereotypes. Where the youth commissioners seemed to be convinced of one right way to make a difference through traditional policy channels, the youth organizers were more open to various possibilities, including acting from within the very system that they had been working to change as youth organizers. Finally, the two groups differed in the way they

framed social change processes, with the youth commissioners tending to adopt a more individualistic frame and the youth organizers embracing a more collective mindset and approach.

As expected, the youth commissioners in this study largely modeled Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) notion of participatory citizens, while the youth organizers tended to exemplify justice-oriented citizens. What was unexpected in the findings, however, and where this study builds on the work of Westheimer and Kahne, was the revelation that justice-oriented citizens can be as inclined to want to work from inside the system as they are to want to work from outside of it to effect change in it. Thus, they may masquerade as participatory citizens, even when they subscribe to justice-oriented beliefs about the need for systems change. This finding is consistent with Rogers, Mediratta, and Shah's (2012) observation that youth organizing can advance both participatory and transformative (justice-oriented) learning outcomes and identities. While the youth commissioners in this study tended to remain squarely situated in the participatory citizen camp, youth organizers seemed to learn how to occupy both participatory and justice-oriented camps, often simultaneously. Interestingly, working from outside the system seems to have helped youth organizers develop an appreciation for insider influence and strategies; however, formative experiences working as political insiders did not appear to help many of the youth commissioners cultivate a comparable appreciation for outsider influence and roles. By overlaying Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) framework onto the "opportunity structure" component of Watts and Flanagan's (2007) model of sociopolitical development, we show how different opportunity structures relate to different developmental outcomes for youth.

This approach and our attendant findings raise implications for practice, theory, and future research. Half of the youth in this study rejected the potentially false dichotomy between system insider and system outsider and expressed the conviction that social change requires efforts by both sets of actors. To this end, both SFE and BCYC are important institutions, because they engage youth in creating change from different angles, one from the outside-in and the other from the inside-out. Insofar as they afford youth experiences as insiders or outsiders, they both support the majority of participants' views about what our society needs in order to advance. In other words, from a practice point of view, there is not one right way to support young people's sociopolitical development, and the majority of youth in this study who saw a need for a joint approach to social change would presumably agree that SFE and BCYC each has a valuable role to play. Rather than an either/or, our study supports a both/and approach to youth engagement. Nonetheless, practitioners might look to the findings of this study to consider the extent to which the sociopolitical outcomes found are in fact those that their organization intends and desires. Youth organizing groups might question how they could respond to the sentiment expressed by one youth organizer, who explained her preference to work as an insider by saying, "I don't want to be marching forever . . . I don't want to march because that's the only thing I know how to do." Meanwhile, youth commissions might consider whether their members could benefit from more training in critical social analysis or consensus work.

In terms of its theoretical contribution, the study demonstrates how unpacking young people's social analysis aids in understanding their sociopolitical identities. While it is certainly important, as Watts and Flanagan (2007) argued, to consider how civically engaged youth understand problems and the extent to which critical consciousness shapes their conceptions, it is equally useful to examine how they believe these problems can best be addressed. Their beliefs about social change processes can differ along a number of dimensions, as the findings of this study reveal. Future research could seek to explicate these dimensions further and examine how (if at all) they change over time and how they relate to social involvement behavior over time as well. Future research could also explore the local impact these groups have and the extent to which the changes they successfully make to policy or institutional practice reflect the differing worldviews and social analysis they promote.

As with any study, the present study has several limitations. First, it is important to acknowledge that BCYC and SFE differ from one another in various organizational characteristics, such as their age, with SFE a full twelve years older than BCYC. This difference may have shaped some of the participants' responses in ways for which we could not account. Similarly, we could not examine how the organizations influenced participants' worldviews. It could be that individuals were more attracted to SFE than BCYC (or vice versa) from the outset because the organization's approach was more aligned with their preexisting beliefs. Whether the organizations helped participants internalize certain ways of reasoning or conditioned them to parrot the discourse used in the organization is a question for future research. Second, not only did this study include many more participants from SFE than BCYC (opening up the possibility for more variance in the SFE answers), but also the SFE participants spanned a broader range of ages and number of years removed from organization. Third, because the study relies exclusively on interview data, findings must be interpreted with caution. Some participants may be more adept than others at speaking off the cuff, at identifying and explaining their views in the moment. In addition, the protocol only contained one question that specifically sought to elicit participants' beliefs about how to effect social change. Other studies have used scenarios to assess youth's theories of change (see Kirshner, 2005), and this type of interview technique may be profitable for future researchers who seek to build on this work. Triangulating data sources, with survey data and artifacts of youth's work analyzed alongside interview data, could also strengthen the trustworthiness of future studies' findings.

Conclusion

As more opportunities arise to engage youth in trying to influence the policies that affect their lives, it is important to step back to ask what they are learning from these experiences. What dispositions, beliefs, and attitudes are they cultivating in these political programs? What types of sociopolitical identities are they forming? On the whole, this study affirms Taft and Gordon's (2013) earlier finding that youth commissions serve a reproductive function, engaging and promoting participatory citizens who will assume

leadership roles as policymakers within the system. Meanwhile, youth organizing groups serve a transformative function, promoting justice-oriented citizens who may embrace participatory principles even as they recognize a need for systems change. While these findings raise intriguing implications for the future of American democracy, illustrating one set of mechanisms that perpetuate and animate extant vehicles for democratic participation, they also have unique bearing on the present moment. How these young people are choosing, framing, and addressing social issues in their communities now bears scrutiny if we are to understand fully the impact they are having today. Whether they are involved as commissioners or organizers, youth are defining the important social issues of our time (Braxton et al., 2013). How they do so, and how they reproduce, revitalize, or reinvent American democracy in the process, warrants our continued attention.

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