YOUTH SENSE OF COMMUNITY: VOICE AND POWER IN COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

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Sense of Community theory suggests that people feel more attracted to groups and settings in which they feel influential or powerful. Unfortunately, young people have no voice or influence in many of the contexts in which they find themselves. Furthermore, teenagers are often unequipped and undersupported to participate fully and feel like they are making meaningful contributions to society. This is especially the case for young people who are disadvantaged or members of a minority groups. A two-part study was undertaken to explore sense of community in adolescents. The first phase utilized existing tools to measure adolescent sense of community in school, neighborhood, and city contexts. The second phase of the study relied on in-depth interviews with teenagers to better understand how they construct their sense of community. This article reports findings from the second phase and looks closely at the sense of community domain of "influence" as it applies to adolescents. Interviews with young people suggest that they feel a stronger self-described sense of community in contexts where they experience voice and resonance, some power and influence, and adequate adult support and challenge. © 2007 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

Research in the area of adolescent development clearly suggests that young people benefit in myriad ways from opportunities to be involved in community (Catalano, Loeber, & McKinney, 1999; Maton, 1990; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). However, much of the research on sense of community (SOC), social cohesion, and social capital has neglected to capture the experiences of adolescents (Edwards, Foley, & Diani, 2001; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Perkins & Long, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Sarason, 1974). This study explores young people's experience in these community settings and

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attempts to better understand the features and characteristics of experiences in those settings that foster positive development of SOC. The main goal of this study is to see how community opportunities increase teenagers' SOC in various settings and what elements of these opportunities have the greatest potential for connecting young people to community.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND ADOLESCENCE

Researchers have suggested that SOC theory has relevance to the teenage population but have concerns about measurement of this construct in teenagers using adult tools (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996). It is important to understand that adolescents may perceive community in quite different ways than adults. Therefore, the tools used to assess sense of community need to reflect this difference. In adolescence, young people are just beginning to reflect on their place in these larger contexts. This review of the literature will connect SOC with these developmental concerns.

Development and Adolescence

Developmental psychology has much to offer towards our understanding of contextual influences on the healthy development of adolescents. Theories of life–span human development suggest that it is the interactive influences of genetic traits and environmental conditions that result in behavior and personality change. With changing conditions in neighborhoods, schools, communities, and the larger society, it is important to look at the developmental needs of adolescents and how these systems either promote or hinder the meeting of these needs.

In the psychosocial domain, theories focus on the adolescent's developmental need for the formulation of a personal and social identity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1993), self-concept (Yates & Youniss, 1998), and personal efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Erikson believed that the process of consolidating a personal identity is grounded in relationships and through an understanding of society, emphasizing the social nature of development. Vygotsky (1978), although technically a cognitive developmentalist, stressed the sociocultural context of development and the importance of social interaction with more advanced peers and adults. Other developmental researchers have found that identity formation and well-being during adolescence consist of integrative issues where adults, peers, and opportunities for exploration play key roles (Adamson, Hartman, & Lyxell, 1999; Grotevant, 1997; Marcia, 1980; Maton, 1990; Pretty, 2002). Interviews with young people conducted by Grace Pretty and colleagues found that their responses "imply identity of self with respect to the community (p. 7)".

Cognitive developmental theories focus on making meaning from experience. Most cognitive theorists are grounded in the work of Piaget (1971), who categorized development as the ongoing process of organizing and adapting to experience. Theories of ego development (Loevinger & Blasi, 1976), constructive development (Kegan, 1982, 1994), and moral and social development (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1976; Piaget, 1965; Selman, 1977) suggest an ever increasing capacity for complex and abstract thought and sense of obligation for others as adolescence progresses, and a increasing sensitivity to community and its claims upon the citizen (Adelson & O'Neil, 1966).

Adolescents emerge from an embeddedness in needs and begin to develop the capacity for mutuality, empathy, and reciprocal obligation (Kegan, Noam, & Rogers, 1982). In addition, with increase in age and cognitive capacity, moral reasoning becomes more integrated in the political-cultural domain (Raaijmakers, Verbogt, & Vollebergh, 1998). As with the psychosocial theories of development, cognitive theories stress the importance of contexts for development (Bronfenbrenner, 1998; Crockett & Crouter, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978) as well as social and group interaction (D'Andrea & Daniels; Kegan) and adult support and guidance (Selman; Vygotsky).

Adolescent Psychological Sense of Community

Adelson and O'Neil (1966) were the first researchers to use the "Sense of Community" description with adolescents, and they did so years before Sarason (1974; 1986) described Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) as the feeling that one is part of a readily available, supportive, and dependable structure. McMillan and Chavis (1986) subdivided SOC into four categories: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Researchers have supported the relevance of SOC to adolescents (Pretty, 2002), have shown SOC to be a catalyst for civic participation (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990), and important for positive social development (Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, & Crichlow, 1995) and well-being (Pretty et al., 1996).

There is, however, little consensus on the psychological dimensions that underlie SOC (Buckner, 1988; Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986; Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Long & Perkins, 2003). Chipuer and Pretty (1992) in their review of the Sense of Community Index (SCI), suggest that basing measurement of SOC on the theoretical work of McMillan and Chavis is a promising frame for the development of this construct, but previous attempts at factor analysis have revealed little support for the four dimensions theorized by these authors (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; 1986; Long & Perkins, 2003). Chipuer and Pretty (1999) report acceptable reliability for the SCI, but they found that the reliability estimates of each of the subscales are unacceptably low. Long & Perkins (2003) report similar problems with the measurement of SOC with the SCI, and they have proposed a three-factor model based on social connections, mutual concerns, and community values. Both studies suggest the strongest support for the "membership" subscale.

Although the 12-item Sense of Community Index (SCI) was developed from a longer measurement tool to measure this phenomenon in adults (Chavis et al., 1986), there is some concern for the appropriateness of this tool with adolescent populations and its tendency to miss constructs important to teenagers such as fun and safety (Chipuer et al., 1999; Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Patten, 2000). Pretty and collegues (Pretty, Andrewes, & Collett, 1994) applaud the inclusion of youth in community research and suggest that SOC can be helpful in understanding adolescent developmental processes. They also have found that SOC in adolescents can differ across settings.

Research on SOC in adults in neighborhood settings has found that it positively relates to neighboring, collective efficacy, and participation in grassroots community based organizations (Long & Perkins, 2003). In youth, SOC correlated with length of residence, number of supports, satisfaction with supports, and nondirective support (Pretty et al., 1994). Younger adolescents tend to have a stronger neighborhood SOC implying that as teens age, they congregate in areas away from neighborhood and thus

feel less connected and have less opportunities to influence the neighborhood. This concerns Chipuer and Pretty (1999), who worry that less opportunity to affect the neighborhood may lead to apathy and lack of community engagement.

In the school context, PSOC in the classroom is an important factor in students' social skills and social behavior in the classroom setting (Bateman, 1998; Goodenow, 1993). Pretty and colleagues (Pretty et al., 1994; Pretty et al., 1996) found that younger adolescents have stronger school SOC and that it is not related to length of attendance at a particular school. In addition, they found that lack of school SOC is a significant predictor of adolescent loneliness (Pretty et al., 1994). There is some indication that a strong sense of school community and student solidarity can act as a formative component of public interest as a life goal for youth (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998).

Civic and Political Identity

In their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* focused on youth, Flanagan and Sherrod (1998) indicate renewed interest in the political development of young people. Research suggests that the drive to integrate with society is a developmental need of adolescence and that political views also develop in concert with identity (Flanagan et al., 1998; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Grotevant, 1993, 1997). Flanagan and colleagues found that family environment is a contributing factor to the development of civic identity and suggest that adolescents were more likely to consider public interest an important life goal when their families emphasized an ethic of social responsibility (Flanagan et al., 1998). Youth from privileged backgrounds show greater awareness of social issues (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999). Although some effort has been made to assess the development of political or civic identity, social responsibility (Berman, 1997), and moral development (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989), these studies tend to neglect the community-focused attitudes. In addition, when community does enter into the discussion, it tends to focus more on structured programs or volunteering as the context rather than characteristics of the community setting itself.

Benefits of Community Involvement and Community Service

The most extensive research on adolescent community involvement has been conducted by Miranda Yates and James Youniss (1996, 1997, 1998). These researchers and others report various benefits of community involvement and community service ranging from prosocial development and self-efficacy (Dryfoos, 1990; Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999), to moral-political awareness, civic identity, and political identity (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss et al., 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1997). The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth reports a much higher likelihood of dropping out in teens who did not participate in community service activities (as cited in Youniss & Yates, 1997). In tracking the benefits over time, researchers have found that community participation in adolescence correlates positively with moral-civic activism and positive outcomes in adulthood (Youniss & Yates, 1999).

Paradoxically, young people from less privileged homes are least likely to have access to these meaningful opportunities because of financial and transportation constraints (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998; Newman, Fox, Flynn, & Christeson, 2000). Yet, developmentally, they may have the most need and much to offer (Brendtro, 1985).

If what makes communities strong are collections of people who feel connected, responsible, supported, and influential, then we should make considerable effort to create environments for and with young people that promote the development of these characteristics. Too often young people get excluded from matters of community yet are expected to behave in ways that are respectful, caring, and responsible to community. In addition, those young people who do get opportunities to be involved in community are often from privileged families, leaving out those who could most benefit from feeling a sense of belonging and purpose. This study is an attempt to get to the heart of young people's experience of community, their development of a self-in-community identity, and their connection to community in order to better understand how neighborhoods, school communities, community organizations, and the community-at-large can better support the positive development of young citizens.

STUDY DESIGN

Participants

In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 teenagers ranging in age from 15 to 18. Five of the 17 were participants in leadership program for young people. This program, run by a Nashville-based youth serving agency, selects 40 high school sophomores each year to be part of the program that meets once a month for 9 months. During the program selection process, the organization made efforts to select a class that is representative of the adolescent population in Nashville with equal distribution of males and females and diversity in other areas. The host organization of this program is an independent non-profit that has been providing services and opportunities for youth and families in Nashville for over 36 years. The 5 participants were selected for in-depth interviews based on a range of mean scores on SOC survey instruments administered during phase 1 of the study. Two males and three females from this program participated in the interviews. All were high school sophomores.

Twelve young people from another youth development program also participated in this phase of the study. This group consisted of African American students ages 15–18 from low-income areas in East Nashville. These students were interviewed at the end of their summer program, after they participated in community research and action activities. The host organization for this program is a small youth organizing agency that works primarily with youth from low-income families in Nashville. They have been in operation for less than 5 years.

Additionally, journal entries on SOC were collected from the 40 participants in the youth leadership program to help triangulate themes that emerged from the interviews. These written pieces are described in the next section. All participants contacted for involvement in the study had the opportunity to refuse participation, and because most participants were under the age of 18, parent or guardian permission for participation was required

This study utilized a convenience sample of young people in Nashville and no claims are made here as to statistical generalization of results (Yin, 2003). The goal of this portion of the study is to expand and generalize theory, and the reader should use this lens as he or she walks through the narratives and subsequent discussion.

CONDUCTING THE STUDY

Student Writings

The 40 participants from the youth leadership program participated in an early program session in which they were asked to write responses to three questions:

1. Think of something that you have recently been involved in that made you feel what you believe is a "sense of community."
2. How would you describe that feeling of a sense of community?
3. This experience of sense of community came about because. . .

Responses were collected and prepared for analysis.

Participant Interviews

One-with-one interviews with young people took place on site at the host organization of the program in which the teens were participating. Interviews began with open-ended questions, such as "tell me what it is like for you in your neighborhood," that allow young people to talk about what is important to them. Follow-up questions were focused on hearing their stories of experiences about what they considered a sense of community to be. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Program Observation

In order to understand better the program and organizational contexts, I spent time in both programs observing program activities and following staff communications and reviewing agendas for program sessions.

Analysis

All transcribed interviews, field notes, and students' written responses were coded utilizing a constant comparative method with the qualitative software application NVivo. After collecting student-written responses to the general questions and notes of two depth interviews, I did a first round of coding with two interviews that resulted in the creation of three general categories: (a) "affective SOC"—how young people describe the feeling of SOC; (b) "SOC experiences"—those experiences, events, and interactions that lead to feeling SOC; and (c) "SOC contexts"—those places or structures in which the experiences took place. From there, I developed properties within those categories based on respondent narratives. I then went through the remaining interviews to see how the data matched the created categories and properties and created new properties as needed.

Early in the coding process, themes around young people's experiences of voice and influence in these contexts began to emerge. At this point, I used the initial three categories to help make distinctions among feelings, experiences, and settings. To explore the themes of voice and influence more deeply, I focused my questions in these areas during the second round of interviews with students in the second program. At this point, I employed the services of a peer debriefer to help check my coding against the raw data to support the credibility of my analysis. I also presented my tentative analysis of the qualitative data to the staff of the two programs for

feedback on the topic of voice and influence as an important area to explore. The peer reviewer and the staff at both programs supported this direction for the analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

My interviews with teenagers suggest that young people feel a stronger self-described sense of community in contexts in which they experience *voice and resonance*, some *power and influence*, and adequate *adult support and challenge*. The ability and opportunity to play a meaningful role in settings and the ability to influence the course of events help young people feel connected and powerful. Young people feel a stronger SOC for contexts to which they feel responsible—they want and need to play a role. When they were asked by adults to contribute, there was an automatic effect of "drawing in" the young person to that context. When young people felt heard, they felt like an integral part of that community. Time after time in these interviews when young people were telling stories of feeling valued and heard in contexts, their narratives became animated and energetic as they described how good it felt to be heard. It also became apparent that in order to feel powerful in these contexts, young people benefited from opportunities to build social competence. Additionally, the chance to put these new knowledge and skills into action with adequate adult support contributed to their empowerment.

Identification of these three main themes involved an inductive, subjective process grounded in my formal and informal conversations with teenagers and my experience with the two youth programs. Although many different themes emerged from these conversations, these three were consistently present across interviews. Specifically, I will discuss, *voice and resonance, power and influence*, and *adult support and challenge* and illustrate each theme with some of the young people's narratives.

Voice & Resonance

In describing experiences where they felt a SOC, many young people talked of times when they felt like they had a say in a community setting. Many connected their experience of SOC to times when they were asked to participate, to contribute in some way in a school or organization. Here, a young person is describing an experience working in a local community organization:

> Yeah, like when we were at meetings, they always asked our opinion. That was kind of fun being able to give your opinion when you have only been there a month. I thought that was great. They really wanted a youth opinion, they wanted a youth voice. All they have is adult people there and a couple of youth. Here, me and my partner came and we gave it to them and they liked it.

Another young person describes feeling important in a church community because of the role that she and other youth can play in decision making:

> The youth are very involved in our church. Our church is really youth-based and I feel like we are important in making decisions.

And another young person describes feeling a SOC in working together with his peers on a project in a youth program and finding a place for his voice:

> With the project, we all give ideas and we are all working toward one specific thing. If I want things done the way that I think would benefit everyone else, then I should say it because if I don't say it then it might not be done.

Young people spoke of embracing the opportunities to contribute their voice in a variety of settings, telling me that they appreciate these opportunities and want to feel like a contributing member of the community. These opportunities, it seems, appear to be reinforcing in that the more they experience the opportunities in which to have a voice, the more they find their voice and want to continue to contribute. They also begin to see how much value their voice can have for the community.

> Like when we did the forum with the (metro) council people. To sit down and talk with them, and to have the opportunity to help someone understand. The youth really have an opinion. To go to Washington . . . people want to hear our opinions. I think we have a say so in everything we want to do.

An opportunity to have a voice in contexts also builds young people's identity as a relative equal in the community and helps develop an expectation for active participation as the norm.

> It makes you feel like a person, like you are an equal. Teens can have a good idea or an opinion and it is important. Adults need to know. It's important to have a say so 'cause we are the ones who will be in charge soon. Come on now, it's our turn.

They had a particularly positive reaction when they felt as if adults heard and responded to their concerns. The experience of voice in certain contexts is similar to the concept of resonance described by Carol Gilligan (1982). For young people to fully experience voice, it requires resonance—some signal that their contributions are being heard and actively considered. Some youth seemed a little surprised that adults in these contexts actually created this space, responded to their voice, and acted on suggestions. When their voice found resonance in these community contexts, it helped young people feel as if they mattered, as if they belonged. One young woman describes her surprise when she was asked her opinion on activities at a community center:

> At that lock-in thing, they really did listen to what I thought we should do when we were planning. I suggested a whole lot of games and things and they (adults) really did listen. They really did listen to me. When we would go on trips and things I would suggest things and they would listen.

Another young person describes her surprise when the executive director of an agency was asking for and responding to feedback about a community program:

> And when we started to tell her stuff, everybody else started chiming in about how to make the program better. Her asking was like *wow, we really have something to say, she really is taking it into consideration, and not pushing it away.* She was just listening and said "I'm gonna call you at home." We're important!

Having a voice in the community matters to young people and it helps pull them into community. And when that voice meets with resonance and has an impact in settings, young people fulfill their potential to have an influence.

Power & Influence

Opportunities in which to contribute and have an influence on community contexts can help a young person feel powerful. It is important to understand, however, that in order to have real power in any of these contexts, young people need a combination of agency (ability) and structure (opportunity) to influence a course of events (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). As Stephanie Riger (1993) suggests, power is control and mastery. To feel empowered, young people need the skills to feel efficacious in these contexts and they need limited barriers and ample opportunities to put these skills into action.

Programs in which the interviews took part were aimed at developing the critical skills, knowledge, and confidence of young people while giving them opportunities to try out their abilities in community contexts. These opportunities have the potential to enhance sociopolitical development and personal and political efficacy. Ultimately, successful youth development programs create young citizens who can act as participants, catalysts, or agents of change in the community: powerful young people. These results are more likely when youth have the opportunity to learn new skills and knowledge in "real time" in a supportive and challenging environment. To take advantage of opportunities to use their voice in the community, young people need the capacity and confidence to do so.

This theme bears some similarity to the "opportunity role structure" characteristic of empowering settings suggested by Maton and Salem (1995). As they suggest, opportunity role structures provide "meaningful opportunities for individuals to develop, grow, and participate" (p. 643). Here, power comes not just from participation but also from opportunities to develop the necessary skills and competencies in order to be able to have real influence in settings. Young people need both to feel powerful and influential.

Especially at the city level, many young people reported feeling overwhelmed by the task of being an active contributor, reflecting the need for new skills and more support: "I don't know enough about the city to even begin to get involved in issues. I was given a month to work on the project and that was all I could come up with." When asked about their role in the larger community, young people often spoke of feeling "small" and "insignificant." Even though many had developed essential skills for community participation, many barriers prevented them from feeling like they could have any influence. Usually, a major barrier involved feeling alone and disconnected from any sort of collective effort.

> I know that one voice can make a difference, but I don't see how. You need people to follow you and pick up on your ideas for that to happen. That alone feels like an insurmountable task for me. There is nothing that I feel like I can implement right now that would have a sufficient and long life in the horrible cycle of hunger and poverty and lack of education and housing, and I just feel like there is nothing that I can do because even if you do one thing, there is so much more you could be doing and should be doing. It's just hard to think about.

One young person summed up the hopelessness she felt around attempts to clean up her public housing neighborhood: "What's the use of cleaning it up if it is just going to go back the way it was?"

Additionally, many neighborhoods and city-level governing structures are not set up to facilitate the involvement of young people. Those who hold the power in these structures decide consciously or unconsciously to exclude youth. Membership or participation is limited to adults, meetings are held when youth cannot attend, and adults set agendas. Youth are, however, experiencing a slight increase in opportunities to share power with adults. Schools are creating structures for youth involvement in decision making: "We have a student forum. We had this issue about wearing different colored tights. It sounds stupid, but it was a first step . . . it paved the way for a way to have more influence."

And communities are looking at ways to have youth representation at the city level.

> Organizations like the Mayor's Youth Council (MYC), you need to be able to voice your opinions in your own way. I think more programs like the MYC need to be started so that kids can really talk to their officers and officials. If youth can talk to them, then maybe we could change it by the time we have kids.

As young people gain power in settings they, become increasingly aware of their personal responsibility to those settings. Many of the young people spoke of their desire to change oppressive conditions in the neighborhood and surrounding community, revealing how their opportunities to play meaningful roles promote their developing sense of social responsibility and agency.

> It really made me look at the little stuff in the community that needs to be helped. The people are just not taking it into consideration. All the trash, and abandoned buildings . . . especially when I'm driving it really makes me think; I pay attention. It's making me think deeper, really deeper than when I thought at first. I thought, *Oh we are going to help out East Nashville.* That was the end. But now I'm brainstorming about how to help East Nashville and about what to do.

It is clear to me that participants in these programs developed a sense of being valued by the community as well as a sense of belonging. It is my contention that this is enhanced by experiences that lead them to feel that they are important and have some power in the community. Also emerging from my discussions with teenagers was the important need for adults to realize their obligation to help prepare young people for meaningful roles in community. Adults need to provide experiences and structures that allow youth to build citizenship skills while playing active roles as full community partners.

Adult Support & Challenge

When young people interact with adults who value their voice as they participate in community, they begin to use their voice in powerful ways. When young people feel valued and needed and are treated with respect, they are drawn into community:

> They talk to us like we are adults; they don't treat us like children. They hear our opinions and give us feedback. They try to let us be involved as much as they can. Adults should speak out and tell us, "We need you; we need your opinion on things."

Several young people talked about how adults in these programs helped them develop their skills and helped build their confidence for community participation. Adults challenged them; they held high expectations; they coached them; and they helped young people find their voice: "I think now that I have a voice or realize that I have a voice that I'll be better in the community. I knew I could do it, but I wasn't pushed and I wasn't ready."

Additionally, adults helped create opportunities for young people to develop through action. They provided opportunities to try out their skills in meaningful ways, and then they offered feedback to enhance the learning from the experience. In the East Nashville program, young people had an opportunity to play an active role in a Metro Council Forum for candidates for their neighborhood council seats. They developed questions for the candidates, and they delivered these questions at the forum in front of a large group or residents. They expected to be heard, and they expected answers:

> For instance, at that forum, we can't vote but we were asking them questions and some of the questions were good; the questions were good. I'm asking you the questions and there are other people listening so you can't mess up on my question. You can't just avoid my questions.

Helping youth build skills and simply pointing youth in the direction of opportunities in the community may not be enough without some effort by adults to break down barriers. Here, a young person describes some frustration with trying to make an impact on homelessness and affordable housing;

> If I want to do something like Habitat for Humanity, then I have to structure it myself, which starting out is such a big problem that—as someone who is only 16—I probably couldn't organize something like that. Maybe I could, but I'm just missing it and that is frustrating to.

A unique blend of support, challenge, and opportunity facilitated by adults can open up a community to young people. Youth can realize their gifts and rise to the challenge with a little "scaffolding" effort from caring adults. Here, a young person experiences this while presenting a financial workshop on the risks of using check-cashing outlets to a neighborhood group:

> At first I got up there and was thinking that they weren't going to be interested. We're a bunch of kids that don't really know what adults have to go through. People were really listening and saying yeah, that's true. They were really listening to us and like, wow, that's wild, 313%! I can't believe that these youth really know stuff like that; they know more than I know. They were really asking us questions. Man, that's really touching people."

Across settings, young people do not feel as if they have much of a say in school, neighborhood, and city contexts. Generally, young people in this study do not feel that their opinions matter, and they do not feel that they can make a difference. It is the cluster of themes that fall under the SOC dimension of "influence" that appears

to leave teenagers the most wanting. For the most part, young people in this study feel like they "belong" in these settings; they feel safe and connected to others, but the influence they experience is not mutual.

Particularly when talking directly with these young people, two patterns emerged. First, when asked about the ways that they experience having a voice in settings, young people often responded that they do not experience having a voice, especially when it comes to their neighborhood or city. Secondly, when they did experience having a say, usually in the context of a community-based organization, they spoke of the important way that adults helped make space for them. For these young people that experienced voice and power in settings, adults played a role in asking them to participate. In addition, adults created meaningful roles and structures for participation, and they supported them to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to be meaningful contributors. This opportunity to be an agent, to contribute to a community setting with adequate support, helped young people in this study to experience themselves as capable and powerful.

Most interesting here is the evidence of a dynamic tension between power and community or agency and communion described elsewhere by other researchers (Bakan, 1966; Riger, 1993). Although Stephanie Riger suggests that there is a risk of an imbalance in which power takes precedent over SOC, this research strongly suggests that this is not an issue for these teenagers. What we see instead is a critical need to increase the voice and power that young people have in community precisely *in order to* connect them to the community. For most young people, the influence dimension of SOC needs intentional bolstering.

DISCUSSION

Similar to findings by Pretty & Chipuer (1996), we see here that young people do not generally experience having influence over settings or the ability to contribute to different community contexts. Also, as was revealed by other studies, young people in this study experience SOC differently, depending on the context (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Pretty, Andrews & Collett, 1993).

What is potentially new here is the evidence of a blend of interdependent contributing factors to youth experiencing power and influence in community settings. Also revealed here is the importance of the role of adults in helping to create the space for young people to be contributors in community settings. SOC for these teens is incomplete without this experience of power, and power depends on a unique blend of experiences. This study suggests that, for teens, power comes from developing capacity, experiencing voice and resonance, and having opportunities to play meaningful roles in the context of caring adult support and challenge.

This equation is limited in that it does not take into consideration contextual factors that can impinge on or enhance a teenager's experience of power. Many teens do not get these types of empowering opportunities. Often, those who do not have these opportunities are low income or minority youth. Even those who do, may not feel fully empowered in the face of dire family economic situations, lack of access to health care, environmental hazards, neighborhood violence and disorganization, overcrowded and unsafe schools, or other injustices. Youth development approaches that neglect the powerful effects of oppressive social conditions risk setting teens up for disappointment. What is energizing about the two programs in this study is that

through participation, teens develop knowledge, skills, and opportunity to become agents of change.

This research also suggests that adults need to find a way to help teenagers find their voice and influence in community settings. There is much recent evidence to suggest that this is happening in community organizations, and some school and city contexts. Unfortunately, many of these examples fall short of providing youth genuine influence and power. Many of these opportunities are simply token gestures that give teenagers the perception of influence without really sharing any power at all. Furthermore, too often the opportunity to have a say in decisions is not balanced with the necessary support to make these experience meaningful and positive. Schools, neighborhoods, and communities can support the development of young citizens by working harder to provide structures for meaningful participation and balance these opportunities with the necessary support and ongoing reflection.

Future research on adolescent sense of community needs to pay particular attention to the dimension of "mutual influence." Links need to be made between young people's emerging developmental need for meaningful community engagement and the opportunities and supports that help young people meet this particular need. Additionally, it will be helpful to better understand the pacing or coaching role that adults play in helping youth learn skills for participation, try them out in supportive environments, and reflect on their actions to learn how to better be an influential member of community settings.

One strength of this study revolves around bringing the voices of young people to bear on the concept of SOC. Scales and measures cannot capture young people's stories of their experience in community settings adequately. With regard to the interview data, I feel as though I was able to describe, with convincing evidence, salient themes of youth experiences of sense of community in these three settings. However, I acknowledge that my theoretical and personal biases may have influenced what I chose to focus on. This is only one picture of many pictures that can be painted from these data. Furthermore, this study makes no attempts to address the immense barriers that most young people face in attempting to exert their voice and influence in settings. Readers should take these limitations into account when considering these findings as relevant to their own interests. This study should only be considered when taken alongside other relevant research in this area.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that young people benefit from some level of voice and power in community contexts. Unfortunately, the influence that young people feel in community contexts, and families, is seldom reciprocal. They are the recipients or objects of the influence and power of adults, but the opportunity to return the influence is too often nonexistent. Described more dramatically, young people experience oppression in community settings and this is especially true for disadvantaged youth. They are often silent and invisible unless they are perceived to be causing trouble. They are excluded from many of the decision making processes that affect their lives. As they are developing the capacity and the need to contribute in the world, the opportunities to develop skills and play meaningful roles are less than plentiful. The reality is, there is always going to be a limit on how connected to these contexts teenagers feel as long as their voice, influence, and support is limited. There is an obligation for adults to

support the development of youth SOC and empowerment by helping create social structures where youth can gain skills and have meaningful opportunities to use them.

We want and expect young people to be active and responsible agents in the community. We hope that they feel a sense of community in schools, neighborhoods, organizations, and cities. We are surprised and dismayed when young people seem apathetic about community or worse, act out against it. Evidence shows that young people's global SOC decreases as they move through high school—no doubt due in large part to the mismatch between their increasing need to exert influence and the lack of meaningful roles afforded them. The voices of youth included here tell the story of young people waiting for the invitation to join in community as full and active participants. Invitations to participate can deliver for young people deep learning about democracy, responsibility, and one's own gifts. Meaningful youth voice and influence in settings can deliver rewards to communities, as youth bring their collective energy, creativity, and innovation to bear on transforming unjust social conditions and alleviating human suffering.

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