African American Young People's Views of Youth Participation and its Implications for Addressing Community Problems

Isabelle M. Elisha

Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the Child Psychology Commons, Developmental Psychology Commons, and the Multicultural Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation

http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/773

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Works by Year: Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG PEOPLE’S VIEWS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ADDRESSING COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

By

ISABELLE M. ELISHA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016
Copyright © 2016

By Isabelle M. Elisha

All rights reserved.
AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG PEOPLE’S VIEWS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ADDRESSING COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

by

Isabelle M. Elisha

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Martin D. Ruck

________________________________________________________

Date Chair of Examining Committee

Maureen O’Connor

________________________________________________________

Date Executive Officer

Colette Daiute

Roderick Watts

Erika Niwa

Beth C. Rubin

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Acknowledgements

Thank you to the young people and school officials who participated in this research for their time and for their interest in this study. I wish them the very best in all of their future endeavors.

Thank you to my dissertation committee. Foremost, I thank my dissertation chair and mentor Dr. Martin Ruck for his guidance, support, and patience. His brilliance, his efficiency, and his availability have been instrumental to my growth as a thinker and researcher. Thank you to Dr. Colette Daiute and Dr. Rod Watts for their inspirational work, their constructive feedback, and their encouragement. I would also like to thank Dr. Beth Rubin and Dr. Erika Niwa for their participation in this project.

Thank you to the Graduate Center students, faculty, and staff for facilitating my doctoral journey. I thank Judith Kubran for being a bright light during difficult times. Vicky Barrios and Latifa Fletcher deserve a gold star for their help with recruiting and for being great friends.

I also thank the Ph.D.s who shared their wisdom with me and were available when I needed to talk. I am particularly thankful to Dr. Caroline Ebanks, Dr. Simonne Pollini, and Dr. Yvonne Rountree.
I thank all of my friends and family for their love, support, and compassion. Thank you to my big sister Vicki for her encouragement and for being there when I need her. I also thank my uncle James Jennett and my dear friend Holly Baird.

Finally, I am especially grateful to my parents Constance Elisha and Dr. Achille Elisha for their ongoing investment in my development and for their unconditional love. They provided me with an amazing foundation upon which to build. I hope to honor them by being the hard-working justice oriented person they raised me to be.
Abstract

AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG PEOPLE’S VIEWS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ADDRESSING COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

By

ISABELLE MADELEINE ELISHA

Dissertation chair: Martin D. Ruck, Ph.D.

Youth participation has been brought to the forefront of scholarly concerns by a growing interest in the positive effects of youth participation on developmental outcomes. However, few studies have investigated within group variations in African American young people’s views of civic participation. The present study examined African American early adolescents’ perceptions of youth participation in resolving community problems. Using a written protocol instrument with open-ended questions, the present study elicited diverse narratives from thirty-one 11-14 year old African American adolescents in order to address within-group variations in their experiences with youth participation and their understanding of racial discrimination. Participants described their understandings of social problems in their communities and their understandings of the role of young people in addressing those social problems. Participants were also asked to write about whether they believe that people are treated differently based on their race and ethnicity. Based on a narrative plot analysis (Daiute, 2013), the two most commonly identified problems for young people in their communities were bullying and racial discrimination. Participants wrote of both problems as forms of social exclusion. As in
previous studies of social exclusion (Ruck, Park, Crystal, & Killen, 2014), injustice and inequality were commonly mentioned themes in young people’s reasoning. In addition, discussions of racist beliefs elicited references to social hierarchy and historical circumstances. Similarly to prior research on child participation (Morrow, 2005), participants in this study revealed a range of experiences with volunteer work and community service. The civic activities young people identified as meaningful ranged from structured school-based activities to information exchanges and self-managed bystander interventions. Many of the identified forms of participation are typically not explored by standard measures of youth participation. The present study’s results are discussed in terms of the extant research on youth participation and social exclusion. The findings of the current study suggest that community problems assist young people in organizing their views of youth participation. Future studies should consider the differences between the participation of African American youth growing up in racially homogenous communities and of those who live in more diverse communities.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................... iv
Abstract............................................................................................................................ vi
Table of Contents............................................................................................................. viii
Chapter 1: Introduction.................................................................................................... 10
Chapter 2: Literature Review......................................................................................... 16
  Youth Participation and Adolescent Development....................................................... 16
  What We Know about African American Youth’s Participation............................... 26
  The present study ....................................................................................................... 37
  Research Questions and Hypotheses .......................................................................... 39
Chapter 3: Methods......................................................................................................... 40
  Theoretical Context of the Present Study .................................................................. 40
  Research Design: Instruments and Protocols.............................................................. 41
    Recruitment and data collection setting. ................................................................. 41
    Participants. ............................................................................................................... 43
  Data Collection Procedures. .................................................................................... 43
    Background and activity questionnaire. .................................................................... 44
    Written protocol instrument. .................................................................................. 44
  Data Analysis ............................................................................................................. 45
    Quantitative analysis. .............................................................................................. 45
    Qualitative analysis. ................................................................................................. 46
    Reliability and validity. ........................................................................................... 49
Chapter 4: Role and Stance of the Researcher ............................................................... 50
  Stance ......................................................................................................................... 50
  My self-worth is not determined by consent forms .................................................. 52
  What counts as civic engagement and child participation? ......................................... 53
  Bullying really is everywhere .................................................................................... 54
  Childhood reimagined as a criminal enterprise ......................................................... 54
Chapter 5: Results and Discussion ................................................................................ 58
  Quantitative Analysis ................................................................................................. 58
  Qualitative Analysis ................................................................................................... 60
    Plot analyses. ............................................................................................................ 60
    Worldview and social analysis. .................................................................................. 61
    Opportunity Structures. ............................................................................................ 73
    Society Involvement/participation. .......................................................................... 76
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications ..................................................................... 80
Appendix A..................................................................................................................... 86
Appendix B .................................................................................................................... 89
References....................................................................................................................... 90
List of Tables

Table 1. Sample plot analysis ................................................................. 48
Table 2. Biggest Problems for Young People........................................... 58
Table 3. Youth participation plot .......................................................... 59
Table 4. Youth participation in relation to perceptions of fairness in American society............................................................... 59
Table 5. Narrative resolution strategies.................................................. 60
Chapter 1: Introduction

Youth participation has been brought to the forefront of scholarly attention by a growing interest in the possible positive effects of civic engagement, children’s rights, and socio-political development (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Lansdown, 2010; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). The available research literature suggests that adolescent civic participation is related to lower rates of certain risk behaviors, lower rates of teenage pregnancy, and higher levels of achievement later in life (Davila & Mora, 2007; Kirby, 2001; Potts, 2000). Yet, only 38% of American youth are currently involved in some sort of formal civic activity (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006). As a result, an empirical focus has been placed on activities and relationships that promote youth participation. By integrating concepts of individual/environment dialectics (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007) and of developmental contextualism (Bowes, Flanagan, & Taylor, 2001; Torney-Purta, 2002), researchers have sought to determine whether there is further evidence that increasing youth participation can diminish the challenges faced by contemporary youth.

Youth participation is broadly understood as “a process in which children and youth engage with other people around issues that concern their individual and collective life conditions” (Chawla, 2001, p.1). Research on youth participation typically focuses on behaviors young people engage in to address public and community issues as well as on their attitudes (Chawla, 2001; Lansdown, 2010; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Torney-Purta, 2010; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013). Investigations of the attitudinal components of youth participation address predispositions that shape young people’s understanding of the world they live in and their place in it (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). These predispositions include young people’s views of social
justice, inter-group relations, and participation in community life (Lansdown, 2010; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Examinations of the behavioral component of youth participation explore young people’s participation in structured service programs, formal community service, and informal self-managed activities (Daiute, 2012; Landsown, 2010; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013).

Through studies exploring young people’s civic participation related attitudes and behaviors, social scientists have become increasingly aware of the existence and problem of an “empowerment gap” in youth participation in the United States (Dawson, 2001; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Levinson, 2009; Lopez 2003; Sanchez-Jankowski 2002; Sidanus et al., 1997; Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, 2007). Specifically, there is a gap between the rates of civic participation for economically affluent ethnic majority youth and participation rates for economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority youth (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Levinson, 2010). For example, economically disadvantaged youth and ethnic minority youth are less likely to participate in community service than White youth from non-disadvantaged circumstances (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006). Reasons for this gap are often attributed to differences in opportunities for civic participation (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Levinson, 2010; Lutkus et al., 1998) and to ethnic minority youth’s distrust of the American political system (Gimpel & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009). However, some scholars argue that findings documenting the empowerment gap may be the result of faulty approaches to the study of youth participation (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2009; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Ginwright and Cammarota (2006) explained that the current literature on ethnic minority youth participation is limited by faulty approaches based on narrow
conceptualizations of civic participation and on the perception that young people of color are victims of their circumstances.

African American youth are disproportionately likely to face a number of poverty-related risks, and are disproportionately identified as having emotional, behavioral, and cognitive difficulties (McLoyd, 1998, 2006). This means that research involving risk, poverty, and civic apathy often involves African American youth (Gutman, Samerof, & Eccles, 2002; Levine, 2010; McLoyd, 1998). Theories generated from these studies frequently infer that race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status are determinants of civic disengagement (Akom, et al., 2008). Specifically, the youth civic engagement literature suggests that low income African American youth may be less likely to engage in traditional forms of service than European American youth because of their ethnic or racial group membership and/or socio-economic status (Hart, Atkins, Markey, & Youniss, 2004; Levinson, 2010; Lopez, 2002). As a result, the use of ethnic minority status as a proxy for culture has become customary in North American studies of civic engagement (e.g., Lopez 2002). This is highly problematic because research on youth participation should be informed by assessments of variances in attitudes, values, and norms (Hart & Kirshner, 2009; Noguera & Cannella, 2006; Sherrod, 2006). Critical examinations of the literature on youth participation have argued that youth participation should be explored not only on terms that child development experts understand, but also in relation to concepts children and their communities find meaningful (Chawla, 2001; Melton, 1999; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Therefore, membership in a particular ethnic group should not be assumed to be the equivalent of a common shared experience or identity (Cross & Cross, 2008a; Fanon, 1952). Careful analyses of youth participation should acknowledge that individual group members’ life circumstances
and contexts vary and as a result how young people come to understand the importance of political and civic participation in their lives will also vary.

The notion that African Americans’ beliefs are responses to the circumstances and demands of their lives has a long history that dates back to the work of W.E.B. Du Bois (1903). As members of a group that has been subjected to discriminatory treatment throughout their history in the United States, African Americans occupy a unique position in American society. Their struggle against ideologies and practices that systemically disparage and disenfranchise Blackness is integral African American group identity (Cross, 1995). However, developmental studies that take into account African American children’s understanding of cultural mechanisms and the ecological contexts of their development were not widely embraced until the 1980s (see Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Ogbu, 1981; Spencer, 1985).

Over the past thirty years, the literature on African American children’s normative development has grown substantially. This growth is reflected in the increase in research investigating African American youth’s behaviors, attitudes, and experiences (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Although the increased attention to normative processes in African American young people’s development is encouraging, the current developmental literature still presents challenges (McLoyd, 2006). One critique of the extant literature on African American youth’s development is that a significant portion of it is still based on comparative research where the nuances of cultural characteristics are not explored (Akom, et al., 2008; McLoyd, 2006). In comparative research designs, the focus is on a group’s similarities or dissimilarities to other groups (Garcia-Coll et al., 1996; Phinney & Landin, 1998). As a result, there is no room for an in-depth examination of a particular group in its own right. The literature on youth civic engagement is not exempt from this critique (Ginwright, 2007). For example, Flanagan,
Syvertsen, Gill, Gallay, & Cumsille (2009) compared the role of prejudice and ethnic awareness in the civic commitments of youth from four American ethnic groups. Still, the Flanagan et al. study is noteworthy because it actually assessed adolescents’ understanding of how their ethnic group membership influences their civic engagement. In much of the existing youth participation literature, important cultural and social factors are inferred, not measured.

Although comparative studies yield important insights about perceptions that may be group specific, within-group studies are needed to inform researchers about how African American young people’s perceptions of youth participation vary. Some of the variance in young people’s attitudes about participation may be accounted for by age, gender, socio-economic status and situational variables (Spencer, 2011). Young people’s evolving understanding of race, ethnicity, and culture (REC) may also have an effect on African American youth’s worldviews, their belief in fairness, and on their hopes for social change (Lansdown, 2010; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Thus, it seems important to continue to explore the social and cultural processes that affect Black youth’s participation.

The present study examines African American early adolescents’ perceptions of youth participation in relation to their conceptualizations of community and social issues and to their understanding of race and ethnicity. Early adolescence is a critical time for the development of attitudes that may shape their future civic identities, because it is a period during which young people have an increasing ability to understand and participate in civic life (Zaff, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Michelson, 2003). It is also a period during which Black youth are actively seeking to understand ethnic and racial issues pertaining to their lives (Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake & West-Bey, 2009; Pahl & Way, 2006). The present study employs a narrative approach to achieve three objectives. The first is to extend our knowledge of African American early
adolescents’ (11 to 14 year-olds) views of youth participation by exploring their understanding of social issues impacting the communities they live in. The second goal is to examine their perceptions of race and ethnicity-based discrimination in relation to current events. Finally, the study will identify forms of participation that young people find meaningful and relevant to their lives.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

At a time in their lives when most young people in the United States are making the transition towards having the right to vote and other full endowments of citizenship, the development and maintenance of an interest in civic and political participation is assumed to be a salient feature of adolescent life (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Considering the relevance of youth participation to young people’s social and developmental outcomes, it is not surprising that researchers should continue to investigate adolescents’ activities and their beliefs in order to understand the processes that lead to increased socio-political involvement (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). However, there are a number of challenges that are particularly glaring in research conducted with African American youth and other young people whose civic participation often falls outside of formal community service or school based activities. The present literature review provides a brief overview of theories and research on youth participation and identifies contextual factors that impact Black youth’s civic development.

Youth Participation and Adolescent Development

Theoretical origins and contemporary rationales. The assumption that youth participation plays an important role in young people’s development dates back over 100 years to the writings of Arthur Dunn (1907) and John Dewey (1903, 1938). During a time when children’s participation and understanding of civic life was largely ignored, both were early advocates for recognizing that adult civic engagement has developmental origins. Dunn (1907) and Dewey (1903) each developed theories of youth participation that remain relevant to contemporary research (Yates & Youniss, 1998).
Dunn’s work is credited with originating some of the concepts that led to the creation of social studies and civics classes for elementary school and middle school aged children (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009). Through research in primarily rural communities, Dunn identified two major components of youth participation: *good habits of citizenship* and *political intelligence* (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009; Dunn, 1907). According to Dunn, *good habits of citizenship* include being helpful, responsible, and cooperative with others in one’s community. His concept of *political intelligence* in childhood and adolescence involves the ability to thoughtfully engage with governing bodies within the child’s community by showing initiative, by being cooperative, and by being aware of current events. Dunn credited John Dewey with inspiring his theories on the development of civic engagement (Dunn, 1907). Dewey (1938) viewed young people’s participation as inherently linked to their knowledge of community affairs. Dewey’s description of citizenship had a developmental course with belonging and positively contributing to the well-being of a community as its goal. He explained that as young people develop, their understanding of citizenship and of belonging to a community grows also. Dewey’s vision of citizenship incorporated elements of autonomy, social competence, purpose, and other concepts that relate to cognitive and social development.

Contemporary understandings of young people’s civic development have expanded Dunn and Dewey’s theories (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Flanagan, et. al, 2010; Russell, et al., 2010) and established three primary rationales for the creation of pathways for youth participation. The first justification for the need to encourage young people’s civic participation involves considerations of children’s rights. In line with Dewey’s assertions about the importance of young people’s autonomy and social competence, children’s participation rights are central to the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC, UN General Assembly, 1989) adopted by the

[T]he child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 12 is relevant to the need for young people to be provided with opportunity structures for participation, with the knowledge necessary for them to develop good habits of citizenship and political intelligence, and for their voices to be given due consideration (Lundy, 2007). In addition, the CRC stresses the importance of young people's participation in civic and political processes by asserting children’s rights to freedom of expression (Article 14), to meet together (Article 15) and to join groups and organizations (Article 15).

The second rationale for youth civic engagement addresses developmental considerations. Many contemporary examinations of youth civic engagement seek to promote the relation between civic engagement and a number of positive developmental outcomes (Davila & Mora, 2007; Eccles, et al., 2003; Kuperminc, Holditch, & Allen, 2001; Sherrod, 2007; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Watts & Flanagan’s (2007) theory of youth sociopolitical development (SPD) expands notions of political intelligence and good habits of citizenship by including a focus on empowerment and justice-oriented activism. The first component of Watts and Flanagan’s (2007) four-component model of sociopolitical development is Worldview and Social Analysis. This component addresses young people’s evolving critical understanding of how individual and group behavior, and social institutions influence social conditions. An assessment of young people’s Worldview and Social analysis considers whether young people view problems in their communities as emerging from larger social, economic, and political
structures, rather than simply from individuals’ choices. The second component, Sense of Agency takes into account the individual’s feeling of empowerment and efficacy as it relates to his or her potential for addressing social issues through civic participation. Opportunity Structures, which are the availability of resources or social conditions that facilitate civic activities, is the third component. The final component, Societal Involvement is the individual’s civic engagement as demonstrated through participation in community service or sociopolitical activism. It is the outcome variable of interest in empirical studies of most youth participation. Watts and Flanagan contend that SPD is an integral part of human development.

The third rationale for the growing interest in youth participation centers on a view young people as resources in building better communities. Over the past two decades, across the social sciences and humanities, a focus has been placed on youth participation as a marker of nascent civic engagement (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010; Smith & Thomas, 2010). This approach highlights the need for the democratic process to be more inclusive of young people’s perspectives. Youth participation is seen as providing young people with the opportunity to contribute to a more just society by drawing on their experiences to shape institutions that serve them (Checkoway, 2011; Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). For example, the participation of disenfranchised youth in systemic changes is seen as a strategy for addressing social inequities that might be overlooked without their input. Finally, this third rationale emphasizes youth participation as a means to promote the acquisition of civic knowledge and practical skills.

With increasing attention to the need for young people to have a sense of social responsibility, the idea that participation and developmental processes are interconnected is now prevalent in the youth participation literature (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Flanagan & Gallay, 1995; Lansdown, 2010).
**Developmental determinants of youth participation.** Contemporary literature on youth participation acknowledges that there are developmental prerequisites for participating in civic and community affairs (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Flanagan, 2004; Flanagan & Gallay, 1995; Hess & Torney, 1967; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002; Torney-Purta, 2002). Traditional forms of youth participation require the ability to understand the socio-political system and the competence to adopt a position on issues of justice, fairness and entitlements (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Flanagan & Gallay, 1995). In part due to concerns about the competence of younger children, conventional research on youth participation has focused on high school and college aged youth (Astuto & Ruck, 2010). However, it is increasingly apparent that an understanding of social and political processes begins to emerge early in life (Astuto & Ruck, 2010).

Most developmental frameworks posit that how children understand and interact with society is the result of their interactions with the people and the places they come in contact with (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Keating, 2004; Rogoff, 1998; Siegler, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). These developmental models also acknowledge that during early adolescence, young people undergo a number of qualitative changes in their thinking (Siegler, 1996). In constructivist models of cognitive development, early adolescence is described as a period when young people undergo a fundamental change in how they view the world; the change involves moving from thinking in concrete terms to thinking in a more logical and abstract manner (Connell, 1972; Keating, 2004). Constructivist models of cognitive development also point to the cumulative effects of social interactions as possible reasons for the emergence of abstract and hypothetical thinking in early adolescence (Siegler, 1996; Smetana, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978).
Previous studies of youth participation have found that young people’s understanding of individual and social responsibility evolves in tandem with cognitive development (Andolina et al., 2002; Metzger & Smetana, 2010; Ruck, Abramovitch, & Keating, 1998). For example, research on children’s rights using a social-cognitive domain approach has provided valuable insights into how young people think about participation. A social cognitive domain model suggests that children apply three different knowledge systems to their understanding of the social world: moral, social conventional, and personal/psychological (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987). The moral domain is based on concepts of justice, fairness, and rights. Social conventions are agreed-upon guidelines that organize human interactions and behaviors in society. Both the moral and social conventional domains pertain primarily to group interactions. In contrast, the personal/psychological domain pertains to the self. Personal reasoning will include notions of individual agency and personal decision-making. Children’s rights research using the social domain approach indicates that children’s understanding of participation corresponds to how children think about morality and personal agency (Elisha & Ruck, 2012). In addition, Ruck and colleagues have identified age-related changes in how young people reflect on their own and other people’s rights (Ruck, Abramovitch, & Keating, 1998; Ruck, Peterson-Badali, & Day, 2002; Ruck, & Peterson-Badali, 2006). Specifically, older children are more likely to endorse children’s rights to agency in decision making and self-expression than younger children. Ruck et al. (2002) link increases in young people’s endorsement of agency in decision making in early adolescence to contextual and developmental changes relating to knowledge, roles, and abilities.

Adolescent beliefs about personal agency, moral rules and socio-legal institutions are important to the development of political intelligence (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). The
communities young people live in facilitate the development of their views of participation. Through family dynamics, school experiences, and extra-curricular activities, young people learn about social norms, policies, and practices that contribute to their life conditions and develop a view of their own capacity to address them, (Flanagan & Gallay, 1995; Youniss, 2006).

**Young people’s participation in community life.** The cognitive resources necessary for youth participation emerge through activities and interactions supported by community based opportunity structures (Chawla & Heft, 2002; Daiute, 2012). Daiute explains that “knowledge and thought about one’s experiences and one’s rights do not occur in a vacuum but evolve in material and symbolic interactions” (Daiute, 2012, p. 178). Therefore, in order to better understand youth participation, it is also necessary to explore the contexts in which their thinking emerges. Previous research has identified a number of community settings, experiences, and processes which have been shown to relate to the development of young people’s reasoning about their current and future civic participation (Daiute, 2012; Sherrod, 2007; Zaff et al., 2003). These include family/home dynamics (Bowes et al., 2001; Duke et al., 2008; Kelly, 2006), school based activities (Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, 2002) and participation in community service (Davila & Mora, 2007; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

**Family/home contexts.** Through daily exchanges, family rules, household chores, and social modeling, families socialize children and adolescents in ways that set guidelines for how to interact with others and how to conduct themselves in society (Niemi & Sobiesz, 1977). Prior research has shown that activities such as housework and household chores are used to promote the development of individual and social responsibility (Bowes et al., 2001). Prior research suggests that certain family environments are more conducive to sustained civic
participation than others. For example, adolescents growing up in single-parent families are less likely to participate in volunteer work than those in two-parent families (Lichter, Shanahan, & Gardner, 2002). Previous studies have also found that parents can promote civic participation by discussing and modeling its importance. Youth who grow up in households where politics are discussed regularly are more likely to be involved in some form of consistent community service or volunteer work than those who are not (Kelly, 2006; Lopez, 2002). Similarly, young people whose parent or siblings have volunteered are also more likely to participate in community service (Andolina et al., 2002). Research also suggests that altruism rich childrearing environments promote long-term civic participation (Kelly, 2006).

**School.** Typically, school is the primary environment where young people gain an understanding of how the political system works and of how they can participate in it. Student government elections, school spirit activities, and taking social studies classes are for many students their primary sources of civic knowledge and provide students with opportunities for youth participation (Hess, 2009; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Research indicates that adolescent civic knowledge is positively associated with an interest in politics, a willingness to vote in the future, and other civic outcomes (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Metz & Youniss, 2005; Torney-Purta, 2002). Civics classes, particularly when they include open discussions, also provide valuable opportunities for young people to be exposed to opinions that may be different from those of their families (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Hess, 2009; Torney-Purta, 2002). Although American youth are now attending more homogenous schools than in the past (Orfield & Lee, 2006; Saatcioglu, 2010), schools remain among the more diverse environments young people frequent. Schools are also where young people are exposed to controversial issues. In an online survey of over 1000 young people aged 15 to 25, 69% reported discussing controversial
social and political issues in social studies classes (Andolina et al., 2002). In addition, school activities such as student government and student clubs allow young people to participate and contribute in ways that may prepare them for later civic engagement. Young people who were involved in school organizations are disproportionately more likely to vote and be active in other forms of civic life as adults than those who were not (Astin, Sax, & Avalos 1999; Flanagan & Faison 2001; Verba et al. 1995). Even when young people were not inclined to participate prior to completing school-based service requirements, their intentions to be involved in the future were positively impacted by their participation in required service (Metz & Youniss 2005).

**Formal community service and service learning programs.** Both longitudinal (Davila & Mora, 2007) and retrospective (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997) studies show that being involved in community service during adolescence positively relates to later civic participation. These findings and other studies connecting adolescents’ community service to positive outcomes have led to the launch of programs to encourage adolescents to volunteer (Sherrod, 2007). In recent years, government initiatives have contributed to the surge in volunteerism in the United States. For example, prior to the 2010-2011 school year, the New York City Department of Education (2012) launched a community service and service learning initiative requiring that every public school be involved in at least one community service activity per year. Through their community service webpage, schools and individual students can register to participate in conferences on volunteerism, in community service clubs, and food drives.

However, participation in community service does not necessarily translate into having or developing interests that will lead to future civic participation. For example, in 2005, 76 percent of Black 12th graders participated in community service - a percentage that far exceeds
volunteerism rates for other Black youth and for African Americans adults (Marcelo et al., 2007). High rates of civic activity among African American 12th graders may be due to the current movement toward semi-mandatory community service for high school students (Marcelo et al., 2007; Webster & Worrell, 2008). It has also become customary for high school students to participate in community service in order to enhance their college applications (Webster & Worrell, 2008). This suggests that there may be a need to distinguish between different forms of participation. In research on children’s rights, two definitions of participation are used (Ennew, 2003; Morrow, 1999). The first definition of participation refers to taking part in or being physically present during an activity. The second is “participation in the sense of knowing that one’s actions are taken note of and may be acted upon – which is sometimes called empowerment” (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, cited in Morrow, 1999, p. 149). With the introduction of required community service for students in many states (Metz & Youniss, 2005), it may be necessary to differentiate between self-serving participation and pro-social participation (Sherrod, 2007).

Another important issue is that the efficacy of opportunities for learning and participating in civic life may be moderated by processes associated with gender, religiosity, socio-economic status, and ethnicity -race (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009). For example, girls and young people who are active members of a church or religious organization are more likely to be involved in volunteer work and social activism than boys and young people who are not religious (Gimpel & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009; Lopez, 2002; Smetana & Metzger, 2009). It is well documented that poverty can have detrimental effects on child development (for reviews see Evans, 2004; McLoyd et al., 1998). Involvement in community service and other forms of civic engagement may protect low-income youth from some poverty related risks (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).
However, young people from low-income families face substantial challenges to active civic participation. Poverty can limit young people’s opportunities for civic participation and their access to civic knowledge (Hart et al., 2004; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Youniss & Hart, 2005). Young people from low-income families are significantly less likely than those from higher income families to report attending classes where politics, social issues, current events, or the structure of American government are discussed (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009). Even when civic education is available, young people’s experiences with values and beliefs communicated in civics classes may not always be conducive to civic engagement. Watts and Flanagan (2007) explain that while schools do empower some young people, they can also disenfranchise other youth. For example, Rubin (2007) reported that ethnic minority youth find that the civic ideals expressed in their civics textbooks conflict with the experiences of injustice they face in their daily lives. For some students in Rubin’s study, the disjuncture between their civics textbooks and their life experiences led them to make a conscious decision not to participate in civics class. Even the participants who expressed an interest in working toward social change reported experiencing “discouraged resignation when faced with the daily discrepancies between what was and what should be” (p. 478). Rubin concluded that young people who experience systemic discrimination are at risk for becoming adults who do not participate in civic life.

**What We Know about African American Youth’s Participation**

For the past decade, one of the most widely discussed theories of young people’s civic engagement in the North American literature has been Robert Putnam’s theory of declining civic life (Benson, 2003; Shea, 2009; Sherrod, 2007). In essence, Putnam contends that civic life in America is waning as a result of young people’s political apathy, declining volunteerism, eroding
religious ties, and low levels of social trust (Putnam, 1996, 2000). Under the theory of declining civic life, African American youth are routinely characterized as politically cynical and as lacking an interest in civic life (Gimpel & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009). Although a number of studies have examined young people’s attitudes towards civic participation and found evidence in support of this characterization (e.g., Lopez, 2002), this perspective remains controversial (Sherrod, 2006; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). In the years since Putnam first articulated his perspective, there has been more research deconstructing theories of declining civic life (Hart & Kirshner, 2009; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

In direct contradiction to the notion that civic life in America is in decline, recent reports suggest that Black youth are engaged in a wide variety of civic activities and are committed participants in shaping their communities (Jacobsen & Linkow, 2012; Lopez, et al., 2006; Marcelo, Lopez, & Kirby, 2007; National Conference on Citizenship, 2008). In terms of attitudes and beliefs about civic engagement, 64% of African American youth aged 15-25 believe they can personally make a difference in their communities (Marcelo, Lopez, & Kirby, 2007). Forty-three percent of African American youth aged 15 to 25 believed that they had a responsibility to get involved in improving their communities (Marcelo, et al., 2007). In respect to activities relating to civic engagement, 85% of African American youth were either “engaged” (at least one activity) or “hyper-engaged” (10 activities or more) (Marcelo, et al., 2007). In addition, more Black youth than White youth participate in after-school religious groups, vote in presidential elections, volunteer during high school, participate in protests, and contact the media to express opinions (Jacobsen & Linkow, 2012). These findings suggest that such civic activities are not captured by traditional theories and measures of civic engagement. While young people’s participation may have changed, the theories and measures have not (Ginwright, 2007;
Levinson, 2010; Youniss et al., 2002). Thus, a closer examination of the processes involved in African American youth’s civic participation is necessary (Flanagan et al., 2009; Flanagan et al., 2010; Phinney, et al., 1994).

The surge of interest in youth participation has brought increased attention to the various social and cultural factors that may shape African American youth’s interest in civic participation (Spencer, 2011; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Examinations of the civic empowerment gap have identified poverty as a potential hindrance to youth participation (Hart & Kirshner, 2009; Levinson, 2010). However, there are other mechanisms that reinforce social stratification and therefore may impact African American youth’s civic participation. The few studies that have examined how young people’s perceptions of race, ethnicity, and culture affect their civic engagement (e.g. Flanagan et al., 2009; Phinney et al., 1994) indicate that these are topics in need of further consideration.

**Race, ethnicity, discrimination, and youth participation.** At the core of civic attitudes and behaviors, there are evolving worldviews, normative assumptions, and contextual frameworks. As young people develop, they construct an understanding of their communities and of their roles within them. African American youth’s understandings of community and the larger society are informed by the meaning they ascribe to race, ethnicity, and culture (Cross, 1995; Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Contrary to the participation and protection rights described in the CRC, African American and other ethnic minority youth in the United States often find that their freedom of expression, their freedom of assembly, and the education necessary to enable them to articulate informed opinions are constricted by racial discrimination (Garcia Coll et al., 1996).
Racial discrimination is the use of racial stratification as a basis for granting or denying basic rights, entitlements, and opportunities to an individual or group (United Nations, 2012). It often takes the form of people being disenfranchised simply because of their race or ethnicity (Pachter & Garcia Coll, 2009). For example, clothing items that are apparently innocuous when worn by European American youth become an excuse for the denial of basic human rights when worn by African American youth (Nguyen, 2015). In *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Black Skin, White Marks), Fanon (1952) described perceptual and psychopathological racial discrimination as distorting Blackness and brown skin into a cancerous disease. He explained under anti-black ideology, Black people are viewed through a ‘racial epidermal schema’ where stereotypes and racist myths cannot be separated from the Black body. As a result, even basic everyday actions become tainted by racist ideology when someone with brown skin engages in them.

African Americans and other racial and ethnic minority groups are affected by discrimination on two levels of social interaction: 1) personal (e.g., individual experiences with racial prejudice) and 2) institutional (e.g., discrimination in education or health care) (Fisher, Wallace & Fenton, 2000; Jones, 2000; Sanders-Phillips, 2009). Although institutional discrimination is a primary cause of group differences in material resources and political power (Jones, 2000; Sanders-Phillips, 2009), personal experiences of prejudice are also likely to be involved in young people’s understanding of civic participation (Flanagan et al., 2009).

For young people, personal experiences of racial discrimination take the form of social exclusion by peers and adults, negative attitudes and behaviors, verbal attacks, and unequal access to resources (Brown & Bigler, 2005; Flanagan et al., 2009; Simons et al., 2006). In the United States, African American youth report higher levels of racial discrimination than
adolescents from any other ethnic group (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006). African American youth are more likely than other young people to report discrimination at school, in stores, and with the police (Fine et al., 2004; Flanagan et al., 2009). The extant literature on young people’s perceptions of discrimination indicates that Black youth are aware of racial discrimination towards African Americans and understand that it can negatively impact all aspects of their lives including their participation in the American socio-political system (Bigler, Averhart, & Liben, 2003; Brody et al., 2006; Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007; Paasch-Anderson & Lamborn, 2014; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). For example, prior to the 2008 election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States, Bigler and colleagues (2008) reported the findings of a study of 5 to 10 year olds’ understanding of why the country had not yet had a female, African American, or Latino president. In participants’ responses to the question “Why has there never been a Black president of the United States?” race based discrimination was a common theme. Many of the participants indicated that it was unlikely that an African American would be elected president due to negative perceptions of Black people in the United States. While Bigler et al.’s question (“Why has there never been a Black president of the United States?”) may no longer be relevant, young people’s understanding of how discrimination in the United States impacts the opportunities that are available to African Americans remains important.

Young people’s perceptions of racial discrimination can have a significant impact on their views of American society. In their comparative study examining the role of prejudice in the civic commitments of American Adolescents from four ethnic groups, Flanagan and colleagues (2009) found a significant inverse relation between reports of discrimination and young people’s beliefs in the fairness of the American political system. Sixty-nine percent of 11 to 18 year old African American participants reported having personal experiences with
discrimination. In addition, African American youth were least likely to believe that the government was responsive to the average citizen. African American youth were also less likely than Latino/a, Arab-American, and European-American youth to believe that equal rights and equal opportunities applied to them. These beliefs about American society are consistent with those reported in national surveys (Marcelo et al., 2007) and by studies that used smaller samples (Fine et al., 2004; Phinney et al., 1994). Overall, research findings about Black youth’s views on fairness in American society raise a number of questions about how racial discrimination affects youth participation.

The experience of racism and racial discrimination creates unique developmental conditions for African American and other ethnic minority youth (Brown & Bigler, 2005; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; McKown & Weinstein, 2003). While research on how discrimination influences youth participation is limited, there is a growing body of developmental research on how discrimination affects child development (see Cooper, McLoyd, Wood, & Hardaway, 2008 for a review). In general, the developmental literature considers racial discrimination to be an environmental stressor, which can significantly compromise young people’s well-being (Brody et al., 2006; Cooper et al., 2008; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Greene et al., 2006; Killen, Rutland, & Ruck, 2011; Sanders-Phillips, 2009). Racial discrimination and the expectation of experiencing discrimination are associated with internalized problems (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Greene et al., 2006; Nyborg & Curry, 2003; Sellers et al., 2006; Simons et al., 2002; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003) and externalizing problem behaviors (Brody et al., 2006; Gibbons et al., 2004; Guthrie, Young, Williams, Boyd, & Kintner, 2002; Simons et al., 2006; Terrell, Miller, Foster, & Watkins, 2006) in African American adolescents. Previous research has also demonstrated that perceived racial discrimination relates to lower academic achievement. For
example, Wong et al. (2003) examined the link between 629 Black middle school students’ perceptions of school-based racial discrimination and their academic achievement (as measured by their perceptions of academic competence and grades). Adolescents’ perceptions of racial discrimination were associated with the belief that school was less important for them and that school performance was less important for their futures. Perceptions of racial discrimination have also been associated with adolescents’ having less confidence in their own academic competence. Another study examined academic outcomes in high school and found that discrimination in 8th grade predicted lower grades and a lower sense of school’s importance in 11th grade (Chavous et al., 2008). Finally, a recent study found that higher rates of perceived racial discrimination in 5th grade predicted lower rates of later college enrollment (O’Hara et al., 2012).

Given that African American adolescents’ experiences with racial discrimination are consistently found to be associated with negative psychological and developmental outcomes, it is not surprising that racial discrimination also has detrimental effects on their attitudes towards civic engagement (Flanagan et al., 2009). Experiencing discrimination can lead young people to feel marginalized (Cooper et al., 2008; Killen et al., 2011; Verkuyten, 2008) and therefore, may compromise their feelings of belonging and of civic responsibility (Flanagan et al., 2009; Phinney et al., 1994). African American youth are often cynical about the role of government and about the American political system (Hess, 2009), but apathy toward civic participation is not always a consequence of growing up in challenging environments (Marcelo, Lopez, & Kirby, 2007). For African Americans, particularly those of low SES, the unfairness of the laws and structures is a dominant theme in their group histories (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002), but African Americans also have a long tradition of youth activism (Hart & Gullan, 2010). Black youth
played pivotal roles during the Civil Rights movement (Lewis, 2009) and continue to be active in contemporary social movements (Dawson, 2001; National Conference on Citizenship, 2008).

**Cultural cognition and youth participation.** As the research literature on African American youth’s normative development has grown, researchers have become interested in how young people think about race, ethnicity, and culture. The findings of studies of racial socialization, racial or ethnic identity, and intergroup contact are important resources in understanding how young people’s knowledge about REC may shape their views of youth participation.

Because parents serve as primary socializing agents, their views and messages about ethnicity and race are likely to be transmitted to their children (Hughes, 2003; Hughes, et al., 2006; Neblett et al., 2008). This transmission of attitudes about ethnicity and race through both overt and subtle messages is termed ethnic, racial or cultural socialization. Black youth’s civic participation is likely to be impacted by parental admonitions about the possibility that discrimination may be a barrier for them. In Flanagan et al.’s (2009) study of the role of discrimination and an awareness of the impact of ethnicity in youth’s civic commitments, African American and Latino youth were more likely than their European American and Arab American counterparts to report having received parental warnings about the potentially hindering effects of ethnic discrimination. African American parents often prepare their children for the possibility of discrimination and racial barriers by incorporating group histories of disenfranchisement and oppression into African American children’s early ethnic or racial socialization (Hughes, 2003; Hughes et al., 2006; Flanagan et al., 2009). Parental warnings are usually reinforced by young people’s personal experiences with discrimination and with
inequalities in contemporary American society. While there was no difference in the civic commitments of the four ethnic groups in the Flanagan et al. study, their civic goals varied by their awareness of their ethnic group and of its status in American society. Ethnically aware African American youth were more likely than other groups to endorse the civic goals of improving race relations and of advocating for the rights of disenfranchised groups. Both ethnic awareness and preparation for bias are components of ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1992).

Prior research has identified ethnic identity as a moderator of risk for African American adolescents (Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2007; Neblett et al., 2006; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). An ethnic identity derives from an individual’s knowledge and understanding of his or her membership in a cultural group (Arroyo & Zigler, 1991; Phinney, 1992). Examinations of adolescents’ ethnic identity trajectories indicate that ethnic identity grows during adolescence and that most adolescents actively explore the meaning of ethnicity in their lives (Huang & Stormshak, 2011; Pahl & Way, 2006). The importance of ethnic identity to African American youth’s civic participation may rest in its potential for fostering a sense of belonging at a time in their lives when they are increasingly aware of the rejection they may face due to discrimination. An individual commitment to a shared identity can provide young people with a sense of social cohesion that promotes pro-social civic attitudes and behaviors (Limber & Kaufman, 2002).

Young people’s explorations of the meaning of race and ethnicity in their lives are often precipitated by critical experiences with discrimination. Previous studies indicate that negative intergroup contact and race-based exclusion relate to how young people think about the wrongfulness of racial discrimination (Ruck, Park, Killen, & Crystal, 2011; Ruck et al., 2014).
Social reasoning about interracial exclusion was also found to be related to greater use of moral reasoning to explain the wrongfulness of race-based exclusion and social conventional reasoning to explain the reasons for racial exclusion (Ruck et al., 2014). Given that so many African American youth face or anticipate facing experiences with discrimination that may place them at risk for civic apathy, the previously mentioned strong rates of civic participation for African American youth may indicate that other processes moderate the effects of racial discrimination on their civic engagement.

One underexplored possible influence on African American youth’s civic participation is intersectionality (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2010). As a theoretical concept, intersectionality was originally developed to address the intersecting race and gender oppressions Black women face (Crenshaw, 1989). The concept has since been expanded to address multiple intersecting identities. African American young people may belong to multiple groups whose participation is systematically limited by discrimination (Ruck, Keating, Saewyc, Earls, & Ben-Arieh, 2014). An intersectional analysis of youth participation would examine how “systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization” that influence an individual’s life experiences and are in turn shaped by the individual (Collins, 2000, p. 299). Studies of civic engagement that include African American participants typically ignore intersectionality. Instead, they focus on racial differences in youth participation with little attention to the possible interactions between race and gender (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2009). However, some studies of youth participation have noted the importance of examining the intersectionality of race and gender in studying African American youth participation (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006, 2010). For example, Fredricks and Eccles (2006) examined high school students’ participation in school clubs and other
extracurricular activities. They found that in African American girls had higher rates of participation in school clubs and prosocial activities than most high school students. African American boys had lower rates of involvement than most high school students. These findings raise a number of questions regarding the impact of intersectionality on young people’s views of participation and on their participatory experiences. Within-group examinations of African American youth participation may provide the means of further exploring the interaction between race and gender.

Finally, it should be noted that although their cultural knowledge influences young people’s perceptions of youth participation, their choices are also a reflection of their personal psychological agency. The concept of psychological agency refers to an individual’s ability to make sense of his or her experiences in ways that may transcend the cultural resources and social structures that inform them (Jenkins, 2001). While many theories of cognitive development fulfill the goal of accounting for the social and cultural origins of thoughts and of the self, the self as an agentic phenomenon is frequently ignored (Jenkins, 2001). The choice to participate in addressing community issues is not simply a matter of group values, but also one of individual preference. Activities where they are encouraged to express their opinions about their lives and about events in their communities can further enhance young people’s sense of agency and other cultural and individual competencies that are key to later civic participation (Yates & Youniss, 1998). Instead of thinking of community life as determined by others, participation has the potential to allow young people to recognize that they have a responsibility for the way their communities are and for the well-being of other community members (Limber & Kaufman, 2002).
Overall, the extant literature on youth participation indicates that there are emerging conceptualizations of civic participation that go beyond those found in the prevailing literature. Specifically, the literature on youth participation has begun to consider the centrality of cultural resources and ecological contexts (e.g. Watts & Flanagan, 2007). The present study seeks to build upon literature that challenges social constructions of African American adolescents as civically disengaged or apathetic.

**The present study**

As the review of the literature shows, a significant amount of research has examined youth participation. In the United States, this research has primarily focused on ethnic majority and economically advantaged youth. Even when African American youth’s civic engagement is studied, the cultural and social dynamics that shape their beliefs are not explored (e.g. Davila & Mora, 2007). In addition, the extant literature on youth civic engagement is primarily based on quantitative research conducted with mid or late adolescent samples (Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013). The present study seeks to extend research on youth participation through an examination of African American early adolescents’ analyses of community problems and their conceptualizations of youth participation. In the present study, cultural processes and social position variables will be understood as contextual mechanisms that account for individual and group variations in young people’s life experiences (Phinney, 1996; Spencer, 1985).

The aims of this study are threefold. The first aim is to examine 11 to 14 year old African American youth’s evaluations of the problems affecting their communities. Early adolescence is a critical time for the development of views of participation; because it is a period during which young people’s understandings of civic life increases (Zaff,
Malanchuk, Eccles, & Michelson, 2003). It is also a period during which African American youth are actively seeking to understand how ethnicity and race may impact their lives (Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake & West-Bey, 2009; Pahl & Way, 2006). Since the participants in the present study will be young people aged 11 to 14, it is possible that some of them may not yet have participated in any form of civic activity other than volunteering. However, it is also likely that they have formed views of problems within their communities and of how they could participate in remedying them.

The second aim of the present study is to explore African American youth’s different conceptualizations of racial discrimination and its impact on their lives. The literature on ethnic and racial processes points to social position factors such as gender, socio-economic status and religiosity as being associated with the likelihood of certain experiences. For example, African American boys are more likely to experience ethnic discrimination than African American girls (Nyborg & Curry, 2003). Previous research has also shown that experiencing discrimination is detrimental to young people’s academic, social, and psychological functioning (Cooper et al., 2008). The present study will explore how African American youth think about racial discrimination in relation to recent events that have been described in the media as examples of race-based mistreatment of African Americans.

The final aim of the present study is to examine young people’s current participation and their interest in future civic participation. In prior research, youth participation in community affairs has been defined as everything from token participation to legitimate involvement in community governance (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). In this present study, youth participation will be explored in terms of young people’s participation in resolving the problems they face in their communities. I will identify forms of participation that young people find meaningful and
examine whether participation varies in accordance with gender, age, and experiences with racial discrimination.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Based on a review of the literature on youth participation, civic engagement, children’s rights, and African American child development, the following research questions and hypotheses were formulated:

Q1: How do young people conceptualize problems facing young people in their communities? Do young people’s perceptions of community problems shift according to age and gender?

H1: Young people’s social analyses and understanding of community problems will vary by participant characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, age and gender).

Q2: How do young people make meaning of youth participation in addressing community problems in relation to their experiences with discrimination?

H2: Experiencing discrimination will alter young people’s interest in volunteering or doing community service. Participant characteristics (including gender and socioeconomic status) will be relevant to variations in their experiences with discrimination.

Q3: How do young people address problems they identify as impacting youth their age in their communities?

H3: Young people will describe a wide range of strategies and activities for addressing community problems. Girls will report more civic participation than boys. Older participants will report higher rates of participation than younger children.
Theoretical Context of the Present Study

The present study draws on theories of social-cognitive development (Rogoff, 1998; Smetana, 2006; Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987) and on contemporary understandings of young people’s sociopolitical development (Elisha & Ruck, 2012; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). These theories are compatible with a notion of development as being constructed through daily activities and their contexts (Daiute, 2012; Daiute, 2013). The social cognitive domain approach has been used in prior studies to examine young people’s reasoning in their assessments of social exclusion and discrimination (Ruck et al., 2011; Ruck et al., 2014). These studies indicate that children use distinct forms of reasoning to evaluate different contexts and interactions.

Sociocultural theories and cultural research have extended our knowledge of cognitive development by explaining that children’s perceptions and understandings are shaped by social, cultural, and historical processes within their communities (Daiute, 2012; Rogoff, 1998; Super & Harkness, 1986). For example, Rogoff and colleagues (Rogoff, 1998; Rogoff, Correa-Chavez, & Silva, 2011) explain that children hold values; specific ways of knowing, feeling, and acting that emerge from their participation in varied family and community activities.

In the youth participation literature, a similar notion of values is discussed in relation to the attitudes and knowledge that either lead to civic engagement or that may be constructed through participation in civic activities (Morgan & Streb, 2001; Youniss & Levine, 2009). Watts and Flanagan’s (2007) four-component model of sociopolitical development includes the concept of values in its first component, Worldview and social analysis. The present study will use the
Watts and Flanagan framework as an organizational tool for categorizing elements of youth participation identified in the participants’ narratives.

A qualitative approach with written open-ended questions, and background and interest questionnaires was chosen in order to explore Black youth’s participation in-depth. A narrative perspective guided my analytic process. For research that aims to examine the influence of contextual factors on development, a narrative approach provides a means of exploring how young people make sense of their lives within their cultural historical context (Daiute, 2013). A narrative approach to examining the participants’ written interviews calls for a consideration of both what is being told and how it is told (Daiute, 2013). By age 11, young people’s narrative abilities allow them to form connections between specific social dynamics and the contexts in which they occur (Daiute, 2013). They understand that through storytelling they present themselves as actors within the story and they know that they have the power to influence the reader/listener’s reactions through their choice of words. There is also research evidence indicating that there are ethnic differences in young people’s narrative styles (Daiute, Buteau, & Rawlings, 2001). Past research indicates that African American young people’s narrative choices displayed an awareness of the psychological states of others. Daiute (2013) proposes a systematic theory of narrative analysis centered on the interactive processes through which narrative inquiry might address identity-shaping dynamics such as those explored in this study. The Daiute approach to narrative analysis is described in the Data Analysis section.

Research Design: Instruments and Protocols

Recruitment and data collection setting. This study’s sample was recruited through three New York City public middle schools. School A and school B were located in a
historically African American, but recently gentrified neighborhood in upper Manhattan. School C was in an ethnically diverse mixed-income Brooklyn neighborhood. At least seventy percent of the students in all three schools were African American. Permission to recruit participants from the schools was obtained from the principal of each school. In order to explain to students why I was conducting a study, I introduced myself, explained that my study was the final project for my Ph.D., and answered questions. In schools A and B, I introduced myself and explained the study to students before passing out consent forms. In school C, I introduced myself to students and explained the study before they completed the study’s materials.

My interactions with students and officials in each school were very different. School A allowed me to have unlimited access to the after school and to its 6 graders. I visited the school 10 times and spoke to 6th grade students on career day. The school’s principal was very interested in my study and encouraged students’ participation in the study. Unfortunately, despite his and my best efforts, only one student of the 90 sixth graders returned the consent form. School B’s principal allowed me to recruit from every social studies class. The principal prepared a schedule for me and accompanied me to each classroom. During breaks in the schedule, I sat in the school’s main office waiting area and conversed with students. We talked about social media, sports, and fashion. School staff prepared me for the possibility that although students were happy to meet me, they would not return the consent form. They indicated that the return rate for consent forms is 1 to 3%. Ten percent of the students in the school returned the consent form for my study. After collecting data, I returned to the school to talk to 8th graders about career and life choices. I also assisted teachers with translating parental permission forms for trips from English to Spanish during my fifth and final visit to the school. School C chose to have school staff distribute the consent form to three classrooms (one for each
grade). Fifty-percent of the students returned the signed form. Prior to collecting data, I conducted three workshops on career and life choices for the school’s 8th grade classes. I only spent two days school C.

**Participants.** Thirty-one African American adolescents aged 11 to 13 participated in this study. The participants included thirteen 11-year-olds, eight 12-year-olds, and ten 13-year-olds. Seventeen participants categorized themselves as female and fourteen as male. Thirteen participants lived in two-parent households (42%), seventeen participants (55%) lived in single parent households (16 with their mothers and 1 with her/his father), and one participant lived with a guardian. Half of the participants who reported living in a single mother headed household listed another adult relative as also living with them. Forty-five percent of participants came from lower SES households, 23% came from middle SES households, and 32% come from higher middle SES households. The criteria for inclusion in the present study were the submission of parental consent and child assent forms, and self-identification as “African American” or “Black.” Participants were given a definition of “ethnicity” and asked to list all of their ethnic background and given the opportunity to list up to six ethnicities. Although all of the participants in the present study self-identified as “Black” or “African American,” participants also categorized themselves as Haitian American, Jamaican, Mixed, Dominican, Italian American, Nigerian, Caribbean American, Puerto Rican, African, and Panamanian.

**Data Collection Procedures.** All data collection procedures took place at the participants’ schools. Small groups of participants completed the study’s instruments in a classroom. I provided a general introduction to the background questionnaire and read the questions from the written interview out loud before participants began completing them.
Participants were encouraged to ask for further explanations of a question or for any other needed clarification at any time. Although participants were told that the researcher was interested in their individual experiences and opinions, they were not discouraged from interacting with each other. The participant from school A asked me to explain a few of the questions to him. Participants from schools B and C talked to each other about their volunteer experiences. They too asked me to explain questions to them.

**Background and activity questionnaire.** Demographic information collected included participants’ age, gender, grade, SES, the activities they participate in outside of school (e.g., volunteer work and church attendance), and their family status. Socio-economic status (SES) was measured using the Hollingshead Four-Factor Index of Social Positioning (ISP) (Hollingshead, 1975). ISP utilizes parental education, parental occupation, parental gender, and parental marital status to estimate the social status of children’s households. The partial scores are then summed in order to obtain the total score. ISP scores will range from 11 to 77. A low ISP indicates high SES. Activity involvement was measured by asking the participants to list the after school activities they participate in and their hobbies. Family status was obtained by requesting that the participants indicate if they have siblings and whether they live in a two-parent home, in a single parent home, or under other circumstances.

**Written protocol instrument.** Participants responded to a structured set of written open-ended questions relating to problems in their communities, opportunities for participating in volunteer work or community service, and racial discrimination. The wording of the open-ended questions was carefully considered because it was necessary to find forms of expression
those children from different reading and comprehension levels could understand. The written instrument comprised five questions:

1. What do you think is the biggest problem affecting people your age in your community?

2. Write about a time when a young person participated to make a (positive) difference about the problem you mentioned above (or a similar problem). How did the person participate? What happened? How did it all turn out?

3. Write about a time when a young person wanted to participate to make a difference about the problem you mentioned above but could not. What did the person want to do? What was the problem? How did it all turn out?

4. Recently, there have been several stories in the news about people being treated unfairly because of their race or ethnicity. Do you feel that people are treated differently based on their race or ethnicity? How often do you think about this issue?

5. Have you ever been treated unfairly because of your race or ethnicity? What happened?

In the results and discussion section that follows, excerpts of participants’ responses to these questions are used for illustrative purposes. All participant names are pseudonyms and identifying details have been changed.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis. A content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012) was used to calculate the frequency with which racial discrimination was listed as the biggest community problem for young people. Fisher’s exact tests were run to identify whether gender, age, or service
experience related to differences in participants’ selection of racism or racial discrimination as a major problem in the community.

**Qualitative analysis.** The responses to all open-ended questions were transcribed word-for-word with grammatical errors left untouched. I repeatedly read the interviews in order to familiarize myself with the data. Next, I analyzed the data from three perspectives: first by identifying the plot of the narratives built along the interviews and second, by examining the participants’ constructions of community and of participation as exemplified by the elements of Watts & Flanagan’s theory of sociopolitical development. Finally, I employed the domain approach to explore the forms of reasoning young people used to examine social issues.

Participant reasoning was categorized as relating to issues of justice and fairness (moral domain), practices in the community context (social conventional domain), or individual preferences (personal psychological domain) (Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin & Stangor, 2002; Smetana, 2006).

The narrative approach employed in the present study is based on the method developed by Colette Daiute (2013). In Daiute’s approach (2013), narratives are analyzed as ways of knowing arising from the narrator’s understanding of his cultural, social, and economic context. My analyses focused on five of the elements of the plot structure of narratives outlined by Daiute: the setting, the initiating action, the complicating action, the high point/turning point, and the resolution. The setting refers to the material context in which the plot unfolds. The initiating action prompts the narrator to act while a complicating action potentially interferes with the narrator’s action. The high point/turning point is where the narrator reconciles the initiating action with the complicating action and directs the listener’s attention toward a pivotal object or exchange. The high point/turning point also marks the beginning of a resolution strategy.
Statements outlining the plot of the narrative were coded in ATLAS.ti and then, labeled and grouped under the appropriate element of Watts & Flanagan’s model for sociopolitical development (see Table 1 for an example). An expression of sociopolitical development or civic engagement was determined to be evident by a participant’s explicit statement of an opinion or description of an experience, and by the implicit assumptions in the participants’ responses. In this study’s narratives, the setting was the participants’ community and the initiating actions were the community problems the narrator identified. The setting or community both informs the narrator’s worldview and provides opportunity structures for civic participation. The identified community problems were understood as reflecting the participants’ worldviews and their analyses of their communities. The high point/turning point was seen as a commitment to societal involvement or a rejection of societal involvement depending on the narrator’s actions. Finally, resolutions that involved civic participation were categorized as social involvement. This analytic process allowed the identification of possible age and gender related patterns.

**Example of a plot analysis of a narrative.** Table 1 presents an example of a plot analysis and of the categorization of expressions of sociopolitical development (SPD) as defined by Watts and Flanagan’s theory. In this narrative, 12 year old Nicki wrote about a time when she and a friend attempted make a positive difference in their community.

One time me and my friend were running for government and one of our campaigns was a program to help reduce the issue of bullying in our school. We didn’t win but we brought the issue to attention to the government members who won and they are working on solving the problem.
Table 1
Sample plot analysis and SPD analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Plot analysis</th>
<th>SPD Element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting</strong></td>
<td>“One time”</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Me and my friend were running for government”</td>
<td>Opportunity structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initiating Action</strong></td>
<td>“One of our campaigns was a program to help reduce the issue of bullying in our school”</td>
<td>Worldview and social analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Complicating Action</strong></td>
<td>“We didn’t win”</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High point/turning point</strong></td>
<td>“We brought the issue to attention to the government members who won”</td>
<td>Societal involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resolution</strong></td>
<td>“They are working on solving the problem.”</td>
<td>Societal involvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even seemingly short narratives like Nicki’s contain the plot elements described by Daiute. Nicki’s narrative begins with temporal ("one time") and contextual ("running for government" and "in our school") settings. Contextual settings form what Watts and Flanagan describe as opportunity structures. Nicki then identifies the initiating action: a desire to reduce bullying in her school. Her desire to address what she views as a major social problem facing young people her age is then complicated by her losing the election. The decision to speak to those who were
elected is a turning point that leads to a resolution in the form of the winners of the election addressing the social problem. Speaking to those who were elected is considered a form of societal involvement. In the final stage of my analytic process, I identified the type of reasoning employed to reach a resolution. Nicki’s decision to speak to those who were elected reflected her use of social conventional reasoning.

Reliability and validity. Two research assistants performed a reliability check on ten percent of this study’s plot analyses. This resulted in an 86% agreement rate on the plot analyses. The validity of the data was insured only for the data relating to the activities young people engaged in to address community problems. Triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000) occurred across sources of participatory activities data by comparing categories of activities generated from the analysis of a data source (i.e., background questionnaires, student activities or the field notes). This across data source triangulation was applied to find common themes and validate findings on the activities young people found meaningful. For instance, for an emergent activity category to be accepted I looked for supporting evidence from both the background questionnaire and participant interviews, and in multiple notations from field observations. For example, participants who listed that they had participated in a school-based volunteer program to rescue puppies listed this activity both in the background interview and in their interviews. I also had evidence of this activity from notes I had taken where I described posters and pictures on school walls.
Chapter 4: Role and Stance of the Researcher

In the first few months of the recruitment and data collection process, I found that my attitude towards my dissertation was dependent on how successful my school visits were. On days when my recruitment efforts were rejected, I left schools wondering why I was doing a dissertation. On other days, I felt confident and happy to be working on a project I care about. On both good and bad days, I remained uncomfortably aware of my status as an unwanted guest in public schools. Everyone with a Ph.D. whom I spoke with suggested that the ups and downs were normal. They told me not to question my project and to try not to see rejection as a judgment of me as an individual. All told me that eventually my dissertation angst would be a distant memory. Following a suggestion from a friend, I decided to keep notes about my experience. This chapter catalogues some of those notes. They include descriptions of interactions prior to and during data collection as well as some reflections on my stance.

Stance

Do you honestly think you can so closely critically, examine me without studying or revealing yourself? Or do you really think your progressive, collective “we” is all that’s necessary in your performance of reflexivity?

– Marlon Riggs, Unleash the Queen (1992, p. 105)

The question of my stance within the context of my research is not an easy one for me to examine. Part of the difficulty is that to consider my stance means exploring how my position as a researcher is shaped by a combination of oppressions and privileges. On the one hand, I am a multi-ethnic Black woman in a field where many of my identities are underrepresented. I am
also the daughter of a parent with a Ph.D. which is both a source of privilege and oppression. On the other, I have a couple of graduate degrees, which provide me with many advantages and protections. The stigma, judgments, and misattributions I experience from others based on gender and race are often countered by the knowledge and empowerment that comes with a having quality graduate education.

In my early research training, I was taught to prioritize the data while remaining aware that my personal wishes should not overshadow it. The researchers I worked with were efficient, productive, and often at a distance from their topics and subjects. Despite more than a decade and a half of reading about the importance of deconstructing traditional approaches to research, I still find myself going back to a traditional construction of professionalism. This type of professionalism says that my research and my data are not about me, but yet I know that they are. The data exist because of my choices and those choices are reflections of “deeply held philosophical beliefs regarding the ideal traits children should develop” (Kagan, 1992, p.991). I strongly believe that it’s important for young people to be empowered participants in meaningful activities that prepare them for their future adult responsibilities. I also believe that children and their communities profit enormously from children being involved in community service or volunteer work. I think that it is important to study the interests of children from diverse backgrounds and I aim to do research that children find interesting. Most importantly, I believe that social justice is a process, not just an outcome.

My determination to respect other people’s processes is part of what saved me from taking a misguided turn into indoctrination during one school visit. Shortly after 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot and killed by a police officer in Cleveland, I collected data in a middle school. Participants in my study were very upset by the shooting death of a boy their age. They
asked me if I thought he was killed because he was Black. I did not give them my personal opinion. Instead I told them that there were several perspectives on the shooting, but that most people were very sorry he was dead. As much as I wanted to talk to them about injustices and discrimination, I knew that was not my role. I was there to conduct research, not to indoctrinate young people towards my perspective.

**My self-worth is not determined by consent forms**

We ought never to allow our understandings of black and American traditions to become so precious that we forget to consider seriously the questions of freedom of choice, patriotism, individual and communal responsibility that are the very substance of contemporary culture and politics.


When I told my friends and former colleagues who work with or in schools that I would be collecting data in public schools for my dissertation, some tried to discourage me. Others wished me luck, promised to help and then temporarily vanished. The administrators at schools where I’d previously worked avoided my phone calls. My aunt, a retired teacher who’d worked in public schools for 30 years, said she couldn’t help me. I eventually learned what they already knew which is that it is very difficult to get back signed consent forms from middle school students.

My only acquaintances who were not deterred were retired African American activists. They made arrangements for me to be a guest speaker at a few schools and called weekly asking
for updates on my progress. They were a big source of encouragement and support. They were sure that the Black children and principals would be delighted to sign on to help a Black doctoral candidate get her degree. I did not dare tell them that they were wrong. Not everyone shares their views of community, of social capital, or of Blackness. If I’d harbored any such delusions, my consent form return rate would have been a serious blow to my sense of self.

One thing being Black did get me was a lot of curiosity. If I was waiting in the main office, students would approach and initiate conversations. After an explanation of why I was there, we’d move on to topics of interest to them. We talked about music, sports and their favorite celebrities. Students told me they liked my dresses and asked for my opinion of their outfits. Inevitably, they’d tell me about their Instagram pages and explain that Facebook is for “old people.” Most of the students who approached me saw me several times and seemed happy to converse with me, but never returned consent forms.

**What counts as civic engagement and child participation?**

This dissertation was born during my fourth semester at the Graduate Center while I was taking Professor Martin Ruck’s course on civic engagement. In class, we read several articles about the difficulty in accounting for ethnic minority youth’s civic engagement. That semester, I was running a free college preparation workshop for low-income high school students. My workshop met twice a month for 2 hours to discuss applying to and going to college. During those meetings, we talked about everything from what it’s like being Black or Latino in predominantly White environments to activities that can make a student seem more attractive to colleges. I was not surprised to find that many of the high school students I worked with did volunteer work, but did not see these activities as padding for their college applications. They
spoke of their volunteering in terms “being a good member of the community” or “doing what’s right,” but did not consider the self-aggrandizing benefits of their activities.

When I started collecting data for my dissertation, it became clear that the middle school students I was working with were similarly unaware of what counted as volunteer work or making a difference. One participant noticed that her friend, who was sitting next to her, had written that she’d never seen anyone who knew her try to make a difference in her community. She reminded the friend of some of the activities they’d participated in through their school and went on to remind three other participants that they had something to write. Her intervention led her colleagues to ask each other and me if particular experiences counted as volunteer work.

**Bullying really is everywhere**

Most of the schools I visited had anti-bullying posters on their walls. Given that they were surrounded by messages about the importance of bullying as a social issue, I would have been surprised if 6th graders had not chosen it as their top problem. When I collected data for my 2nd year project, global warming and the environment were all over the halls of middle schools. At that time, 6th graders listed the environment as the biggest problem in their communities.

**Childhood reimagined as a criminal enterprise**

“No other animal species has been cataloged by responsible scholars in so many wildly discrepant forms, forms that a perceptive extraterrestrial could never see as reflecting the same beast”

– William Kessen (1979)
Despite having worked in or with public schools for the past 16 years, I am still unsettled by the experience of entering prison-like institutions with bars on their windows, metal detectors, uniformed guards, and TSA-like beverage rules. Entering these schools can feel intimidating and dehumanizing. It’s sometimes hard to believe that these institutions are supposed to educate and empower young people. As an adult visitor, I say to myself: “This should not be normal.”

As a doctoral student in Developmental Psychology, I know that to many of the children who go to these schools and for some administrators, it is. At some point, we re-defined some children’s childhood as a phase where excessive policing, surveillance, and confinement are acceptable.

During my 18 months of data collection, I entered many schools where I was required to go through metal detectors and leave my water bottle with the guard. I observed students go through the daily inspection mechanically. They appeared to be unfazed by it. I was surprised by this given their young age and my past experience working with high school students who felt uncomfortable with the NYPD presence in their schools. Eventually, I learned that most of the 8th graders in metal detector school came to class late every day. When I asked school administration about it, I was told that the students are undisciplined. When I asked a friendly guard about it, he explained that students wanted to avoid the line to go through the metal detector. On a few mornings, I arrived at the school at 8am and found that 8th graders were sitting outside the school waiting for the metal detector line to move or for the metal detectors to be deactivated (at 10am in some schools). I took this to mean that their lateness was a subversive rebellion against an overly policed education system rather than a sign of lack of interest in learning.

My own middle school years were spent on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, just 20 blocks away from these schools, but we might as well have been in separate worlds. My middle
school did not have guards. We had a stern middle-aged French woman in orthopedic shoes. We were all afraid of her, but we also knew that the power relations with adults in our school were not so clear cut. If she or another adult abused her or his authority, we had recourse.

Unlike many other young people in NYC, we were acknowledged as children and our antics were judged to be youthful indiscretions. We would not be handcuffed or treated as the delinquents we sometimes were. Even our worst transgressions would not be criminalized. I was reminded of this one morning as I participated in a school’s career day. For some reason, I’d been paired with a police office for classroom presentations. The police officer was from the neighborhood, had been in the military, and was now an officer with the NYPD. His presentation was supposed to be a ‘local boy done good’ narrative. In one 6th grade classroom, it turned into an awkward question and answer session. Many of the students appeared to be excited to ask him questions. Among them, there was a determined 11-year-old who’d recently been arrested for disturbing the peace on public transportation. She had a list of questions with dates, charges, and police officers’ names, and she wanted answers. She did not understand why she was put in handcuffs and taken to the local precinct. I didn’t understand it either, but was not in a position to add to her questions. Instead, I watched the police officer squirm and deflect her questions. When she insisted that he give her answers, he turned an aggressive shade of red. At one point, the conversation became contentious with the officer telling her she probably deserved to be arrested and pulling out his note pad to write down the 11 year old’s name. He was relieved when the half-asleep teacher informed him that his time was up and it was my turn to speak.

Needless to say, the questions I got were far less exciting. Students wanted to know why I’d spent so much time in school and if I liked what I do. I told them about the wonderful life of
a doctoral student and described my pre-doctoral children’s rights project to them. The 11-year-old who’d previously interrogated the police officer asked me: “What about a child’s right not to be arrested?”
Chapter 5: Results and Discussion

Quantitative Analysis

The findings presented in this quantitative section consist of descriptive statistics identifying how frequently different social problems were identified and the frequency distribution of each social problem. Participants listed 12 problems in their communities. These problems were identified through a content analysis (see Table 2). Some participants listed more than one problem. Discrimination and bullying were the most frequently listed community problems with 9 out of 31 (29%) participants listing each one as the biggest problem for young people their age in their community. Contrary to expectation, gender and age was not related to the top choice of a problem. According to Fisher’s exact test, the difference between the distribution of discrimination as the biggest community problem for young people their age for 11 year olds (2 out 13) and 13 year olds (4 out of 10) was not statistically significant. The differences between the choice of discrimination as the biggest problem by boys (6 out of 14) and girls (3 out of 17) was not statistically significant either. In response to the question “Is America a fair society where everyone has an equal chance to get ahead?” Sixty-one percent of participants said that America is not a fair society, 26% said America is fair, and 13% did not know. The Fisher’s exact tests also indicate that participants’ estimations of fairness in America were not related to gender, age, or to whether they had community service experience. The qualitative analyses examine participants’ conceptualizations of community problems.
Table 2
Number of Participants who listed various issues as the biggest problem in their community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Age 11</th>
<th>Age 12</th>
<th>Age 13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>29% (n= 9)</td>
<td>46 % (n = 6)</td>
<td>25% (n = 2)</td>
<td>10% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial discrimination</td>
<td>29% (n = 9)</td>
<td>15% (n = 2)</td>
<td>37.5% (n = 3)</td>
<td>40% (n = 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>22.5% (n = 7)</td>
<td>15% (n = 2)</td>
<td>25% (n = 2)</td>
<td>30% (n = 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad Behavior</td>
<td>22.5% (n = 7)</td>
<td>30.7% (n = 4)</td>
<td>25% (n = 2)</td>
<td>10% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexism</td>
<td>n = 3</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police brutality</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>n = 1</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangs</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>n = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet/Media</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment/neighborhood</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>n = 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative Analysis

**Plot analyses.** In my analyses, community problems are the initiating action. Community problems launch the plot of the narrative and provide the narrator with the motivation to find a resolution. The resolutions in this study’s narratives consist of societal involvement (SI) or civic participation. The present study’s hypotheses, predict that experiencing discrimination will be a complicating action that could potentially prevent the narrator from finding a resolution. The plot analyses for youth participation in relation to discrimination are presented in Table 3. Table 5 examples of narrative resolution strategies.

### Table 3
Youth participation plot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (Experienced Discrimination) n=5</th>
<th>Current SI</th>
<th>Discrimination Initiates Action</th>
<th>Future SI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n = 5</td>
<td>n = 5</td>
<td>n = 3</td>
<td>n = 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Group 2 (No discrimination) n=26        | n = 15     | n = 6                           | n = 25    |

### Table 4
Youth participation in relation to perceptions of fairness in American society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (America is fair)</th>
<th>Current SI</th>
<th>No SI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n = 5</td>
<td>n = 5</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Group 2 (America is not fair)           | n = 12     | n = 6 |

| Group 3 (Do not know)                   | n = 3      | n = 1 |

| Group 4 (No response)                   | n = 2      |       |
Table 5

Narrative resolution strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resolution strategy/Societal involvement</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal volunteer work</td>
<td>Mackenzie (age 11): “My friends and I help puppies to find a home. Work well.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bystander response</td>
<td>Initiating action: violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jessica (age 11): “Someone told them to stop.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call an adult</td>
<td>Initiating action: bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carlos (age 11): “[I] told the nearest adult and the issue was resolved.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No resolution strategy</td>
<td>Initiating action: bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jackson (age 12): &quot;I have not seen this before&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Worldview and social analysis.** Worldview and social analysis refers to young people’s beliefs about society and the roles of individual and groups play in shaping it. If young people are to be taken as legitimate participants in society, their views of social problems and normative social behavior should be heard (Limber & Kaufman, 2002). In the present study, participants’ worldviews were expressed throughout the written interviews in their listing of major problems within their community, their views of racial discrimination, and their assessments of opportunities for young people their age to participate in making a difference in their communities. Worldview and social analysis are the initiating action in the narrative plot.

*What/where is the community?* The first open-ended question asked participants to consider the biggest problem affecting young people their age in their community. The meaning of the word ‘community’ was left open to interpretation in order to allow for participants to
define what and where they considered their community. Community contexts are the settings of young people’s narratives. They play formative roles in young people’s civic development by providing them with forums for articulating their opinions, education that enhances their understanding of social issues, and opportunities for participation (Limber & Kaufman, 2002). Young people’s worldviews and their social analyses are shaped by their communities. Conversely, the ongoing narratives within communities and the very existence of communities will be influenced by the attitudes of the young people who live in them. In these responses, schools were the most frequently identified community context with 19 participants referring to their schools as a community of concern in response to at least one of the open ended questions.

The choice of school as their most frequently mentioned community is not surprising. For most middle school aged youth, school is their primary area of social interaction outside of the home. Research on young people’s perceptions of school often focus on the relational aspects of young people’s interactions in schools and describe schools as communities of people, not as physical spaces (Libbey, 2004). It is also where they spend most of their time. While school attendance is an obligation for early adolescents, school also provides them with the opportunity to interact with young people their age who share their interests and concerns. Eleven year old Jessica responded to the question about community problems with the explanation that bullying is a big problem in her school. The community context she established in response to this first question carried over to the other questions. All of Jessica’s responses were related to the social conventions in her school. In response to the question about whether she had ever experienced discrimination, Jessica remained in the school context saying “No one in my school has this problem.” In total, 10 participants referred exclusively to school-based interactions in their responses to the written instrument, all except one were 11 years old. Other
participants wrote of school as one of their communities and purposefully compared experiences within school to those outside of school. Their aim in comparing problematic issues across contexts appears to be to emphasize the significance of the problem. Kayla, age 12, explains her choice of bullying as the biggest problem facing young people her age by saying that it crosses community contexts: “What I think is hard for people my age is that they get bullied in school and outside of school.” Similar justifications for the choice of a social problem were present in four other narratives with more than one narrative setting or the word “everywhere” being used to highlight the severity of a problem. The emphasis on explaining that bullying crosses contexts appears to be a means of indicating that the problem goes beyond a violation of the social norms of one context and is actually a larger cultural issue. However, considerations of social norms and cultural problems do not appear to apply to all community contexts.

Despite the popularity of online communities and social media among young people, only three participants mentioned or referenced online/virtual settings or the media as one of their communities. This is surprising given that a majority of the participants listed online activities among their favorite activities outside of school. Several participants indicated that they are on Instagram, Vine, or Twitter, all of which have been sites of online discussions of social problems and tools for youth activism (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). The three participants who referenced online environments appear to view technology based communities as environments where problems from other community settings subsist. Noah, age 11, wrote almost exclusively of problems created by “Bad people making music videos” and described feeling helpless in his attempts to solve the problem. Eleven year-old Tyler lists playing video games online as his favorite activity, but also sees it as a problem. He explains that young people his age are often distracted by their activities with technology. In response to the question about the biggest
problem for young people in his community, Tyler says, “I think that it is technology. Personally myself I can’t look away from my game console.” Ashley, also 11, described an incident where bullying that was stopped in school later continued online. All three participants either imply or explicitly state that online and media based interactive settings are not accorded the same community status as physical environments despite their affording similar opportunities for social problems to thrive. Since the 28 other participants who also use technology and list it as a favorite activity, did not refer to online or media environments as communities these three participants may be correct in their assessment. This appears to be a source of distress for all three participants as they each noted feeling helpless in stopping problematic activities in virtual communities.

“Bullying everywhere.” Bullying and many of the other social issues that preoccupy young people are situationally appropriate although they may not figure among the primary social concerns of adults (Ginwright, 2007). Twenty-nine percent (n = 9) of participants listed bullying as the biggest problem for young people in their communities. Of those participants, six of the nine participants who listed bullying as the biggest problem in their community were 11 years old. In total 46% of 11 year-olds (6 out 13) mentioned bullying. Bullying appears to primarily take place at school with all 9 participants concurring with 11-year-old Jessica who indicates, “Bullying is a big problem in my school.” One participant mentioned cyberbullying and four stated that bullying is “everywhere.”

Although bullying, bully, and other variations of the word appear 46 times across the 31 interviews, what actually constitutes bullying is not explicitly explained in most of the narratives. The implicit definition of bullying appears to include fighting, social exclusion, and malicious
teasing. Eleven-year-old Trinity calls bullying “being mean.” Twelve year old Nicki writes about bullying as a form of social exclusion:

I think the biggest problem affecting people my age in the community is bullying because everyday I see my friends and other kids get bullied and left out of other activities and that makes me feel bad for them.

As in prior research on social exclusion (Ruck, et al., 2011; Ruck, et al., 2014), Nicki and other participants use moral reasoning to address the wrongfulness of bullying. Feeling bad or sad for those being bullied and the belief that it is fundamentally unjust were commonly expressed sentiments. Moral reasoning in the form of statements about bullying being wrong appears to initiate action as participants expressed that their desire to fight bullying was a result of feeling distressed by seeing others treated unfairly. Bullying was the only major problem mentioned by participants from all three schools included in this study.

Although school communities are governed by central policies set by departments of education, school-specific issues create unique dynamics as relates to children’s perceptions and their experiences. For example, three participants discussed bullying incidents which can at least partially be associated with their schools’ neighborhood-based demographic context. The incidents they described involved Emily who is a member of the ethnic majority in the United States, but is an ethnic minority in their school. Joshua, age 13 explains that “Emily is from a white race and she gets bullied all the time.” It is unclear whether Joshua distinguishes between racial discrimination and bullying. Bullying appears to be an all-inclusive term for mistreating others.

*Racial Discrimination.* Nine participants (29%) listed racial discrimination as the biggest problem in their communities. Out of those nine participants, two were 11, three were 12 year olds and four were 13 year olds. The word discrimination was only mentioned twice. Instead,
participants used the words unfairness, racism, and inequality, and described behaviors they viewed as discriminatory. For example, Mike, age 13, writes:

I think the biggest problem affecting people my age in my community is that they will call people names because of their race. For example, they may see a Mexican person and call them Mexican instead of their name.

As with bullying, participants used moral reasoning to assert the wrongfulness of discrimination. For example, Carlos who is 11 explains: “I think a lot of the problem [of discrimination] because it is not fair and people shouldn’t be treated unfairly.” Twelve-year-old Jackson writes of discrimination as inequality explaining that the biggest problem in his community “is about not having equality. Some people take other people for granted.” Ashanti, age 13, expands on the notion of inequality:

I believe the biggest problem faced by people in my age group is the lack of equality. You are harshly judged by sexual orientation, race (if you’re not white), and if you’re a woman (even if you’re white) you are not treated with same respect and tolerance as a white, straight male.

Ashanti and the eight other participants who chose discrimination as the biggest problem wrote eloquently about the issue and provided explicit examples of incidents of discrimination. However, 6 of those 9 participants reported having been treated unfairly based on race/ethnicity. Most of their justifications for their choice of discrimination as the biggest problem were based on moral reasoning involving issues of justice and fairness. Participants discussed their perceptions of other people’s experiences and of recent stories on the news.

Five of the thirty-one participants reported experiencing discrimination based on their race or ethnicity. As predicted, more boys than girls reported having experienced discrimination (4 boys and 1 girl). Eleven year olds Jack and Elijah, and twelve year old Jayden were the three participants who selected discrimination as the biggest problem facing young people their age and had a personal experience with being treated unfairly due to their race. Jack chose not to
describe his experience with racial discrimination, but explained that he thinks about the problem of discrimination all the time. All five of the participants who had an experience with discrimination reported thinking about discrimination frequently. Most of Elijah’s responses to the written instrument addressed his confusion about his own experience with discrimination. He says that he is treated differently because he is a Black male. Elijah describes an experience at school where he fell and a teacher screamed at him and punished him. A non-Black female student also fell, but instead of being punished, she was sent to the nurse’s office. This is the only described experience with discrimination that took place at school. Jayden’s experience with racial discrimination took place in a public setting. He describes an incident where a Black passenger on public transportation expressed anti-Black sentiments. Jayden writes: “I was on the train when a black person said negro’s should all die and all negro’s go to hell no matter how much they pray.” Jayden explains that his experience is not unique and that he often “see[s] people attacking each other with racial slurs.”

Two of the five participants who reported having been treated unfairly due to their race, did not choose discrimination as the biggest problem for young people their age in their community. Destiny, 13, chose “not understanding right from wrong” as the biggest problem. Having immigrated to the United States at an early age, Destiny explained that she has often been discriminated against due to her ethnicity: “First time I stepped in the U.S I use to hear people say negative stuff about me and it makes me very upset hearing such comments.” Thirteen year old Xavier listed bullying as the biggest problem, but says he thinks about discrimination every day. His experience with discrimination, like Jayden’s took place in a public setting: “When we were in a Jewish neighborhood and my mom asked over 10 people for directions, they ignored her and asked us to leave the block.” All four of the described
experiences with discrimination have a verbal element. Jayden and Destiny were subjected to explicit hate speech and slurs, while Xavier and his mother were not spoken to other than for the purposes of asking them to leave a neighborhood. The verbal aspect of discrimination was mentioned by 5 participants. Brandon and Rachel both wrote about the problem of people using the “n word.” Rachel attributes the use of racial slurs to people “acting like [they] dont have no home training.”

Although the incidents of discrimination described by participants were interpersonal, they were also aware of institutional discrimination and its possible consequences. Jade says that thinking about discrimination makes her “feel very bad and mad and sad.” Joshua worries about how discrimination might impact his education, while Nicki is concerned about it impacting her ability to fulfill her dreams. Ashanti appears to believe that facing discrimination at some point in their lives is inevitable for young people of color. Similarly to early adolescents in prior studies (Ruck et al., 2014), she uses a social conventional justification to explain her view and refers to the historical and social events. Ashanti mentions racial profiling, police brutality, and hate group the Westboro Baptist Church as examples of the pervasive nature of racism and discrimination. In response to the question about whether she’s experienced discrimination, Ashanti says: “Not yet.”

The view that facing discrimination is an inherent part of the African American experience has likely shaped preparation for possible bias by adults and by the current political and social climate. At the time of data collection, stories across various forms of media linked recent incidents in which Black people died at the hands of police officers to racial profiling, racial discrimination, and white supremacist ideology. All but two participants (93%) indicated
that they were aware of these recent cases in the media and agreed that they may due to
discrimination. Brianna discussed these cases and the ensuing protests:

Yes, [people are treated unfairly because of their race] for example, Mike Brown, Eric
Garner, Tamir Rice, and Treyvon Martin. People say it was because of police brutality
but others think it was just the fact that they’re all black. People have protested or march
because of the incidents recently nationwide.

The reasons for these incidents were widely debated in media outlets and by the participants. As
in previous investigations (Killen, Henning, Kelly, Crystal, & Ruck, 2007; Killen, Lee-Kim,
McGlothlin, Stangor, & Helwig, 2002; Ruck et al., 2014), participants allude to the history of
injustice toward African Americans in the United States in their responses. Eleven-year-old
Angel identified white supremacy as being at the root of these recent incidents. He said that
“white people think black people are animal.” Twelve-year-old Rachel suggested that the lives of
African Americans hold less value than those of animals:

I feel people are treated differently because of their skin color because a black guy killed
a dog, and got 15 years in jail, but a white police officer killed a black guy for no reason,
and he didn’t have to go to jail.

On the other hand, Aaliyah (13) was reluctant to attribute recent incidents solely to racial
discrimination:

I believe that people are treated differently based on their race or ethnicity. Recently,
there have been many cases where people have been hurt or killed, due to racial
discrimination. But, I believe this is more because of police brutality. People should also
look at it that way.

Several of the 13-year-olds were more focused on the problem of inequality and unfair treatment
than on their causes:

Destiny: These days the police officers are killing blacks and I feel as if this is part of
discrimination.
Gabrielle: I feel that it is highly unfair that people of a different race should be treated
unfairly.
Chris: I feel like the situation is getting out of hand with all the killing and unjust.
Alexis: It is very unfair treatment.
Overall, the thirteen year old participants seemed to be most concerned with issues of justice, equality, and fairness. Nine of the ten 13-year-olds wrote at some point in the interview about something being unjust or something needing to be fair. All of the 13 year olds were aware of recent publicly reported incidents of racial discrimination. Although 60% of 13 year olds indicate that American is not a fair society, they do not appear to blame “the system” for problems in their communities. Instead, they are interested in how their participation can make a difference in their communities. None of the 13 years olds indicated never having seen someone make a difference in their communities and all of them expressed an interest in participating in community service in the future.

**Sense of Agency.** Although it is important to understand that human experiences are organized by their social context, human behavior and decision-making are not entirely dependent on social or cultural factors. One under-explored element of child and adolescent behavior is the role of psychological agency in structuring meaning (Jenkins, 2001; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). A sense of agency is the ability to consider alternatives and connect meanings that reflect an individual’s goals and wishes (Jenkins, 2001). It allows young people to conform to, reject, or alter the values that are communicated to them. A sense of agency is also essential to the turning point in a narrative plot. The ability to act on their goal enables young people to move from expressing a worldview to engaging in actions that address it. Participants in this study actively made choices in how and why they framed their storytelling. Even when the question did not call for an additional explanation if their response to it was no, some participants chose to place their “no” in context. For example, in response to the question about whether she’d ever experienced racial discrimination, Nicki explained:
I have never been treated unfairly because of my race or ethnicity because where I grew up or am growing up, I have always been with people the same race as me. This however, doesn’t mean that I have never seen other people being treated differently because of how they act by calling them a specific race. I don’t like the use of stereotypical grouping when it comes to the way I act. 

Nicki’s experience of growing up primarily around other Black and Brown people is similar to that of most of the participants in this study. All of the participants in this study came from public schools that were predominantly African American and Latino in historically African American and Latino neighborhoods. It is likely that within this context, they are at reduced risk for experiencing discrimination. What is singular about Nicki’s response is that she chose not only to place her own experience in context, but to indicate that she knows it is not the only possible experience. Two other participants, Brianna and Joshua also stated that they had not been treated unfairly due to their race or ethnicity because their “community and school [are] mostly filled with blacks or people just like [them].” Three other participants indicated that although they’d never personally been discriminated against, they had witnessed discriminatory behavior towards others. The choice to mention these details was likely influenced by a desire to convey to the researcher that their understanding of race, ethnicity, and culture (REC) comes from more than just their own personal experience. An awareness of the effects of discrimination and the struggle against institutionalized racism are at the heart of African American ethnic identity and socio-political history. By providing additional details regarding their cultural knowledge, participants situate themselves and their understanding of how REC impacts African American lives within a larger social context.

In addition to directing the reader’s attention, participants were also strategic in their approach to outlining plans for making changes and addressing problems in their community. Prior examinations of youth civic engagement have identified strategic thinking as important to
young people’s civic development (Youniss & Hart, 2005). The participants in this study describe planned actions including speaking up for those who need help at pre-determined times and participating in organized protests. Aaliyah wrote about her classmates’ involvement in the protests against the Common Core Exams. In 2010, New York State adopted Common Core Standards outlining what students at each grade level should know (New York City Department of Education, 2014). Common Core exams assessing student performance in English Language Arts and Math have led to parental, teacher, and student protests (O’Brien, Winn & Currier, 2014). In New York City, one third of all students were absent on common core exam days in 2014. Aaliyah explains why she considers these exams to be the biggest problem facing young people her age:

The biggest problem affecting people my age in my community (my age), are lack in understanding some educational subjects. This is due to tests being harder each year, which I don’t understand. There was a time when parents were complaining about the State Exams. Not only the parents but the kids were concerned too. They protested at the Board of Ed. People, especially kids, wanted examinations to be fair. At the end, some kids ended up not taking the State exams in 2014.

Not all of Aaliyah’s friends were able to participate in making the decision about whether they should be taking the exam:

Some of my friends did not want to participate in taking the State exams. But, their parents thought otherwise. That is what prevented them from protesting. They ended up taking the exam.

For many young people having a point of view and feeling empowered to express it often does not translate into empowerment to act. Due to restrictions placed on them as a result of their age, young people’s sense of agency is often stifled by the adults in their lives. In Aaliyah’s example, children were not allowed to make decisions about their own education. This is not surprising because public school systems in the United States tend to follow an authoritarian model which does not encourage children to participate in decisions about their education. Although young
people are encouraged to assist those who are in need through community service, they are not encouraged to develop or apply sociopolitical skills that will assist them in improving their own circumstances within a school system. Ironically, a system that is supposed to empower young people often leaves them feeling powerless through its insistence on not giving them a voice.

Elijah says: “When I tried to help someone and they screamed at me.” Noah attempted to address a problem in his community: “I tried but no one listened so I failed.” Encouraging young people to actively participate in the world around them by speaking up for themselves and others is a sign that they matter (Lansdown, 2010; Limber & Kauffman, 2002). It is a means of communicating a respect for them as human beings that will help them to develop a positive sense of agency. As young people are given opportunities to become involved in problem-solving and to take responsibility, they become increasingly adept. Participation also allows young people to learn ideas and values that may not be understood if they are merely observing others.

**Opportunity Structures.** In the structure of a narrative, an opportunity structure is categorized as a setting. However, Watts and Flanagan (2007) explain that an opportunity structure is more than just a physical setting or program; it includes recruitment and mentorship from adults and other youth who may be more experienced. In response to the question about young people their age wanting to make a difference in their communities, 11-year-old Angel replied “I’ve never seen that.” He was one of six participants who reported never having seen someone their age work on the biggest problems in their communities. The other 25 participants described school and neighborhood based opportunities to make a difference as well as every day informal forms of civic participation. The participants who had already completed some form of volunteer work or community service listed their volunteer settings and circumstances. The most
commonly listed setting was school (9 participants), with church and neighborhood being the second most listed (8 participants each), followed by on their own (4 participants), and with a parent (2 participants).

The school-based opportunities consisted of structured programs, school elections, puppy rescue programs, and environmental awareness campaigns. Four participants reported having participated in a puppy rescue program where they encouraged families to adopt homeless puppies. The program had an educational component in which they were taught about the benefits of adopting a dog over buying one in a pet shop. Eleven year old Mackenzie and twelve-year-old Kayla both describe the program as having “worked well.” Other participants described either their own electoral campaigns for student government or their friends’ campaigns. Nicki and one of her friends ran for student government on an anti-bullying platform. They developed a strategy and even outlined a plan of action:

Me and my friend did a campaign to help stop bullying but we didn’t get elected so the idea wasn’t able to be put into affect. The idea was that we were going to have anonymous feeling check in each homeroom so teachers would see what’s going on with students and deal with any issues. There could also be a mentor program where students could talk to other students about problems they have. Students could talk to other students about problems they have.

When faced with an obstacle to her plan, Nicki still sought an opportunity to participate in remedying what she sees as the biggest problem for young people her age. Her actions reflect a desire to adhere to the social conventions of elections by deferring the resolution of problems to the winner:

Our campaign was a program to help reduce the issue of bullying in our school. We didn’t win but we brought the issue to attention to the government members who won and they are working on solving the problem.
One of Nicki’s classmates, Jasmine, 13, wrote of her friend who won the election and became the 8th grade class president, “Sanaa in my school today is trying to make our 8th grade year fun (she is president) by making things fair between us all.” Jasmine, Nicki, and other participants described student elections as providing them with an opportunity to consider what they would change in their communities, to figure out a plan for change, and to promote their plan to a group of their peers. The students who wrote about the elections expressed enthusiasm for the process and their appreciation for having the opportunity to be heard. Prior research with high school students has found that participation in school government or school-based political clubs is related to higher rates of adult political participation (Glanville, 1999).

However, student elections like many other opportunities for participation in middle school are adult controlled. Young people are often not allowed to operate in isolation. Adults often set the social conventions governing youth participation: they create the opportunities, determine who participates, and establish rules that govern participation (Zeldin, Larson, Camino & O’Connor, 2005). Jasmine explains that one of her friends who wanted to run for student government proposed a campaign based on promoting fairness, but “was turned down because of a teacher and her reaction to it.” Adult explanations for why young people should not participate sometimes include questions about the child’s capacity to form a judgment. Brianna, age 11, explains that although many of her friends see opportunities for helping their classmates who are being bullied, they are often dissuaded by teachers:

Well sometimes people do speak up for others but teachers or any school official that’s taking care of the problem would say that you should have minded your business because constituting or engaging in the problem can get you in more trouble because you can be biased and lean on somebody else’s side.

Brianna says that these types of warnings from teachers keep some of her peers from taking action: “Instead of either engaging or participating or constituting, some people just say stop and
move on.” The theme of child immaturity or incompetence is common in the literature on children’s participation. Children often report that adults see them as helpless or unable to make a rational decision (Elisha & Ruck, 2012). As a result, they are denied the opportunity to participate in decisions and activities that may have consequences for their well-being. Although adults such as the school officials Brianna describes may have good intentions, their actions may have negative consequences. By denying students the rights to speak up for others, they also deny them the dignity that can develop from being recognized as someone who contributes to his or her community.

In addition to adult admonitions of child immaturity, young people also contend with structural impediments to their participation. For example, voting, a commonly used measure of civic engagement is not an option for children and younger adolescents. In response to the question about barriers to participating in solving community problems, Rachel says “When children want to vote they can’t because of their age.” Other systemic problems have to do with the availability of opportunities for participation. Many of the community service programs that are open to urban youth have limited enrollment. Jade writes:

Over the summer every year I participate in volunteering on helping kids by baby sitting with friends throughout the day while the kids’ parents are at work and while my parents are at work. When my friends wanted to work with me they could not because all the spots are full.

Babysitting is often not considered a form of service in the youth participation literature, however, for Jade and other participants who listed it as their volunteer work, it is a meaningful activity that affords them the opportunity to feel like they are contributing to the improvement of their communities.

**Society Involvement/participation.** Societal involvement consists of participation in community service, volunteer work, and activism, and a commitment to future civic
participation. It is the resolution element of the narratives in the present study. Sixty-four percent (n = 20) of participants had already participated in some form of community service and 96% (n = 30) were interested in doing community service in the future. Sixty-nine percent of 11 year olds, 37% of 12 year olds, and 80% of 13 year olds reported having done one or more form of community service or volunteer work. Contrary to prediction, the participants who reported experiencing discrimination were not less interested in doing volunteer work or community service.

The civic activities participants listed included picking up trash in a public park, finding homes for puppies, doing chores, babysitting, feeding the homeless, and babysitting through a community service program. They also participated in the student government process as candidates, voters, and subsequently in student government positions. Finally, participants reported working on solving problems in their communities by speaking up or otherwise intervening when they see something they consider to be wrong.

Trinity: In my school, there are some people saying, “Stop being mean!”

Mike: There was one time when one of my friends was being insulted by their race and then got so tired of it and just told everyone that it doesn’t matter about their race. In the end, the people who kept bothering him stopped and moved on.

Jessica: Someone was being pushed on the stairs and someone told them to stop.

These are examples of civic activities that might not be captured by traditional measures of civic engagement. Although there is a growing acknowledgment of the need to revise the prevalent means of assessing civic participation, much of the current research literature limits the definition of civic activities to benevolent deeds conducted in the context of a formal program (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2009). Standing up for others who are being bullied and
speaking up when attacked with racial slurs are important self-directed forms of child civic participation. The young people in these examples are actively engaged in dealing with bullying and discrimination in their school communities. They are engaged in meaningful solution oriented activities without the benefit of a formal program or structure to address concerns.

In addition to discussing their own civic behaviors, participants discussed those of other young people their age and of media figures whom they admire. Participants wrote about student government members who are working on issues of fairness and described observing classmates assist other. The media figures that they listed were older than them. Gabrielle wrote about 2014 Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai:

There was a young lady in the Middle East who stood up for women by standing in the face of a terrorist. She ended up getting shot in the head.

Ashanti wrote about an activist who is popular on social media:

Tyler Oakley, a young man in his 20’s, decided that it was his duty as a gay male himself to resolve the problem of suicidal members in the LGBT community. He has impacted the media world and has made himself an idol in said community with his bubble personality.

These excerpts come from Gabrielle and Ashanti’s responses to the question about people their age making a difference in solving the biggest problems in their communities. Gabrielle listed sexism as one of the biggest problems for young people her age. Although she did not know Malala’s name, she apparently found her advocacy for girls and her story compelling. Ashanti’s narrative about Tyler Oakley begins with a description of the protagonist, segues into the initiating action (LGBT suicide in the military), and ends with her positive assessment of his societal involvement. Even when the result of participation is negative such as in Gabrielle citing Malala being shot, participants express an appreciation for being able to participate in
resolving problems. Twelve year-old Faith explains that “making your own choices” is what matters even if you “go on the wrong turn.”

Young people care about a number of social issues and are eager for opportunities to address them. This study’s participants appeared to be exploring forms of participation that allow them to make meaningful contributions to the betterment of their communities even when they face the risk of being punished by the adults in charge. They spoke up against problems they were concerned about, they helped others, and they participated in protests. This study’s data do not provide solid evidence of the effects of gender, age, or REC, but they do confirm that young people are thinking about how social stratification and discrimination might impact them. In regards to racial discrimination, three distinct narrative plots emerge from the data. The first exemplified by Nicki is characterized by the belief that racial discrimination is a pervasive source of injustice and a personal preoccupation with how racism might impact her future. The second was evident in Jasmine’s interview. It is characterized by being aware that issues of discrimination are believed to be related to the recent killings of unarmed Black men and thinking about the topic regularly. The final narrative was one that has been characterized by the youth civic engagement literature as one of civic disengagement (Putnam, 2000). This narrative is typified by participants who do not express an awareness of current events and are unaware that individuals can make a difference in their communities. Fewer than 10% of participants were in this final category. Thus, the 96% who are interested in doing more community service and other findings of the present study should suggest some optimism in regards to the future societal involvement of African American middle school-aged youth.
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications

The present investigation focused on examining African American 11 to 14 year olds’ civic development as reflected in their views of social issues, their perceptions of child participation in addressing community issues, and their interest in future participation. This was accomplished by presenting participants with a background and activity questionnaire, and by asking them to complete a written interview. Young people were asked to provide information about their experiences with volunteer work, their views of whether American society is fair, and to indicate whether they would like to do more community service in the future. In addition, participants were also asked five open ended-questions about problems in their communities, their societal involvement, and their perceptions of discrimination.

In their narratives, young people addressed different focal problems for young people their age and provided different forms of societal involvement as resolution strategies. As in prior examinations of young people’s participation narratives, the present study’s narrative plots indicate that contextual factors, including social problems, assist young people in organizing their thinking, their interactions, and their perceptions of civic participation (Daiute, 2012). The two most commonly identified problems for young people in their communities were bullying and racial discrimination. Participants wrote of both problems as forms of social exclusion and wrote about the importance of social inclusion. As in previous studies of social exclusion (e.g. Ruck et al., 2014), the type of reasoning young people utilized to address community problems centered on the moral domain with injustice and inequality being commonly mentioned themes. In addition, as other studies have noted, discussions of racist beliefs often elicited social conventional reasoning in the form of references to social hierarchy and historical circumstances (Ruck et al., 2014).
As in prior research on child participation (Morrow, 2005), young people revealed a range of experiences with volunteer work and community service. They took part in service learning programs at their schools, volunteered in their neighborhoods and churches, made the decision not to litter, and performed household chores. Many of the forms of participation young people engage in are difficult to document because they fall outside of formal channels. However, the activities describe by the participants in this study are developmentally and situationally appropriate. For many young people, more meaningful forms of participation are those that address issues that are pressing in their lives. Although most adults would probably not select bullying as a primary social problem, for young people the issue of bullying brings forth concerns about issues of social justice and intergroup acceptance that are present in their immediate surroundings (Ginwright, 2007). The majority of young people in this study felt that it was important for them to be involved in problem-solving and decision-making in their communities. All but one participant indicated an interest in further civic participation. In addition, contrary to research with African American high school aged youth, racial discrimination did not appear to alter middle school aged young people’s attitudes toward civic participation.

Many of the experiences the participants in this study described are not unique to African American youth. Due to age related restrictions, even when young people are eager to participate in resolving a problem or wish to express an opinion, they face significant barriers. The participants in this study were well-aware of the fact that they are denied a wide range of opportunities and rights due to their age. This finding is consistent with those of research on children’s perceptions of their rights. Elisha and Ruck (2012) noted that “once children are aware that their rights are likely to be violated, they may take steps to protect themselves” (p.
The participants in this study described protecting themselves from adult reprimands by altering their behavior. For instance, Brianna explained that in response to adults telling them to mind their own business “instead of either engaging or participating or constituting, some people just say stop and move on.” From an adult perspective on civic engagement, telling a bully or a bigot to stop may not appear to be a civic behavior. However, in research on intergroup contact and social exclusion, this type of intervention is termed an assertive bystander response (Abbott & Cameron, 2014; Abrams & Killen, 2014; Ruck et al., 2011). Within the context of child participation, expressing an objection to a particular behavior is a way for children to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and their interest in the well-being of others. Future research could further investigate the strategies young people employ to get around adult imposed restrictions on child participation.

In addition to age related restrictions, participants also expressed concerns about the possibility of their future being restricted by their race or ethnicity. These considerations are particular to the experiences of ethnic minority children and children from stigmatized groups. The results of the present study are consistent with prior research and theoretical work suggesting that early adolescents are cognizant of the salience of race in American society (Bigler, Averhart, & Liben, 2003; Brody et al., 2006). Most of the participants were aware of recent incidents of racial discrimination and reported thinking about discrimination even if they had never experienced it. Young people have the ability to identify with larger social groups and communities that may be distinct from their own. For example, several participants asserted that not having a personal experience with racism did not mean that they were not aware of the discrimination faced by others. These assertions appear to be connected to the accessibility of perspectives, values, norms and symbols associated with an African American identity. In this
age of social media dominated by memes, hashtags, and vlogs, the knowledge, language and other cultural tools for identifying with African American and other youth who have been treated unfairly due to their race, are widely available. However, this is not simply a matter of children being influenced by their environment. Their sense of agency is at least partially responsible for how they position themselves. Young people make active choices in who to identify with and how to express this identification.

The present study has a number of limitations that should be acknowledged. The small sample size significantly limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. However, the present findings on young people’s reasoning about community problems are strengthened by their consistency with the results of prior research. In addition, the written instrument proved to be challenging for participants with literacy issues. Several participants replied to the open ended questions with single words or only one sentence. The written format appears to have favored older participants as 12 and 13 year olds typically wrote more than the 11 year olds. In addition, the administration of the written instrument in the participants’ schools may have led them to assume that school was the community they were being asked about. Although prior research has found that family interactions and at home activities influence young people’s participation (Bowes et al., 2001), none of the participants in this study mentioned their families in response to the questions about forms of participation in the written interviews. Families were only mentioned in the background questionnaire. Finally, the fact that the open ended questions did not explicitly link race/ethnicity and youth participation may have prevented some of the participants from connecting the two topics. Future research employing a verbal interview as well as a written component with explicit questions about whether race/ethnicity influences participation might provide more detailed information from all participants.
The findings of this study suggest several future directions for research. Research examining the differential impact of experiencing discrimination in middle school versus experiencing it in high school might offer further insight into the developmental trajectory of the effects of racial discrimination. In addition, future studies should consider the differences between the participation of African American youth growing up in racially homogenous communities and of those who live in more diverse communities. Prior research on intergroup contact indicates that intergroup contact is related to higher attributions of racial motives (Ruck et al., 2014). The findings of the current study suggest that the ethnic context in which young people live may serve a protective function.

Finally, research on African American youth participation consistently finds that girls are more likely to participate than boys (Fredericks & Eccles, 2010; Gimpel & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009; Lopez, 2002; Smetana & Metzger, 2009). The fact there were no gender differences found in this study may suggest that the gender gap in African American youth civic engagement emerges later in young people’s developmental trajectory. In light of the highly publicized killings of Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and other African American males by police, Black boys may view themselves as targets for attack rather than participants in the construction of society. They may see their civic participation as unwanted and potentially dangerous to them. Given the growing interest in youth civic engagement as a normative part of child development (Watts & Flanagan, 2007), future research on African American youth’s participation might benefit from in-depth examinations of how intersectionality contributes to young people’s understanding of inequality and injustice.

The current study contributes to the available literature on youth participation by extending our understanding of forms of youth participation and of how young people think
about them. In light of Article 12 of the CRC, prior explorations of youth participation have called for more research where participation is defined by youth, not just by researchers (Chawla, 2001; Melton, 1999). Despite the current scholarly focus on youth civic engagement and children’s rights, young people’s participation in addressing community problems is still relatively invisible. Unlike other disenfranchised groups, young people are often not allowed to enter into public discussions about their communities’ concerns and needs (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). In the present study, the use of a narrative approach allowed young people to discuss problems in their communities and identify participatory activities that are salient to their lives. The civic activities young people identified as meaningful ranged from structured school-based activities to information exchanges and self-managed bystander interventions. These spontaneous forms of participation typically are not explored by standard measures of youth participation. In addition, the findings of the present investigation support the notion that youth participation provides young people with the opportunity to direct their attention and efforts toward setting realistic goals and acquiring skills that address issues they consider to be of importance. A promising view based on this study is that young people are interested in future participation in resolving the problems in their communities which offers the hope that as more concrete pathways for youth participation emerge, young people will be ready to access them in their quest for social change.
Appendix A

PARTICIPANT ID # _________

BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

Date of Birth: _________________________ Age: _______
Gender: _____Female _____Male:

What is your current grade level? (Please check one)
___ 6th grade  ___ 7th grade  ___ 8th grade

Were you born in the United States?  Yes_____ No _____

What is your racial, ethnic or cultural background? You may list up to four terms. For example, “Mexican American” counts as one term.
1. ___________________________ 2. ___________________________
3. ___________________________ 4. ___________________________

Living Situation: Who do you live with? (Please check one)
___ Mother and Father
___ Mother
___ Father
___ Other
Please specify:
_____________________________________________________
____
Do you have brothers or sisters? (Please list their ages)
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Parental Occupation:
Mother: ______________________________________________________________
Father: ____________________________________________________________
Guardian: __________________________________________________________

Family Educational History (please circle your response)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not finish high school</td>
<td>Did not finish high school</td>
<td>Did not finish high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma or</td>
<td>High school diploma or</td>
<td>High school diploma or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.E. D.</td>
<td>G.E. D.</td>
<td>G.E. D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Some college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate or professional degree</td>
<td>Graduate or professional degree</td>
<td>Graduate or professional degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On an average day, what activities do you take part in outside of school? Put a star next to up to 3 favorites. You can include after school clubs, going to church, volunteering, and anything else you do outside of school. 1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.

Do you belong to any after school groups or clubs? If yes, please name them. Place a star next to your favorites.
1.
2.
3.

Have you ever done any community service or volunteer work to help other people? Yes ________ No________
Where did this take place?
School _______ Church ________ Neighborhood
On your own _____ Other ___________________

How often do you do community service or volunteer work?
___ Never
___ One to five times a year
___ Once month
___ Regularly (more than once a month)

Would you like to do volunteer work or help out in your community more often?
No __ Yes__ Maybe__ Not sure __
1. What do you think is the biggest problem affecting people your age in your community?

2. Write about a time when a young person participated to make a (positive) difference about the problem you mentioned above (or a similar problem). How did the person participate? What happened? How did it all turn out?

3. Write about a time when a young person wanted to participate to make a difference about the problem you mentioned above but could not. What did the person want to do? What was the problem? How did it all turn out?

4. Recently, there have been several stories in the news about people being treated unfairly because of their race or ethnicity. Do you feel that people are treated differently based on their race or ethnicity? How often do you think about this issue?

5. Have you ever been treated unfairly because of your race or ethnicity? What happened?
References


Hollingshead, A. B. (1975). *A four factor index of social status*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Sociology, Yale University, New Haven, CT.


http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Civic_Eng_MinorityYouth.pdf


http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Electoral%20Engagement%20Among%20Latino%20Youth.pdf.


*Journal of Early Adolescence, 9, 34-49.*


In Bernal, M. & Knight, G. (Eds.) *Ethnic identity: Formation and transmission among Hispanics and other minorities* (pp.61-79). State University of New York Press.

Phinney, J. S., (1996). When we talk about American ethnic groups, what do we mean? 

*American Psychologist, 51 (9), 918-927.*


Phinney, J., & Landin, J. (1998). Research paradigms for studying ethnic minority families within and across groups. In V. Mcloyd & L. Steinberg (Eds.),


Spring, K., Dietz, N., & Grimm, R. Jr. (2007). *Leveling the path to participation: Volunteering and civic engagement among youth from disadvantaged circumstances*. Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community
Service. Retrieved from
www.nationalservice.gov/about/role_impact/performance_research.asp


Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth. NY: Routledge.


