1 Youth Organizing

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Introduction

Throughout US history, youth have played instrumental roles in driving social change. From the American Revolutionary War (Werner, 2009) to the abolition, suffrage, and labor rights struggles of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Light, 2015), the social movements of the 1950s and 1960s (McAdam, 1988), and the intersectional campaigns for racial, economic, and climate justice of today, youth have long been on the frontlines of progressive, liberatory social projects. Historically, much of this engagement has been momentum-based, catalyzed by pivotal moments that inspired young people to join causes or movements; however, during the 1990s, a new structure-based model for engaging and supporting youth change agents emerged: youth organizing.

Many of the nonprofit organizations that pioneered this new model of youth organizing formed in response to the dominant discourse and policies of the era, which framed low-income youth of color as dangerous populations in need of tight surveillance and social control. The cover story in a 1995 issue of *The Weekly Standard* warned of "The Coming of Super-predators," and the term quickly caught on in mainstream media and political rhetoric, facilitating the passage of harsh social policies targeting purportedly dangerous youth (Kwon, 2013). Examples of such policies included gang injunctions, policies that increased criminal penalties for youth who committed felonies and allowed those aged fourteen or older to be tried and convicted as adults, and the federal 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act, which ushered in a new era of zero-tolerance gun policies in schools.

Drawing from the new field of youth development, which instead emphasized youth's assets and their potential to contribute to society, the youth organizing groups of the 1990s focused specifically on engaging low-income youth of color, aged thirteen to eighteen, and building their collective capacity to counteract the damaging policy perspectives of the day. From its inception, youth organizing has therefore integrated programming focused on promoting young people's healthy holistic development through the work of community organizing for local change.

Programmatic Features

Three core programmatic elements distinguished these early youth organizing groups: developmental supports, political education, and organizing work. Although I describe each in turn below, it is important to note that these core elements are typically pursued in tandem and work to complement and extend one another.

Developmental supports aim to build youth's skills and competencies. Sometimes these supports took the form of workshops, healing circles, or retreats; other times they were instantiated as in-house academic tutoring, college or career counseling, or mentoring structures. Crafted to be responsive to youth's needs, interests, and intersectional identities, they aimed to meet youth where they were and honor their aspirations. With its grounding in youth development principles, this strength-based approach ran counter to efforts that intended to "fix" "at-risk" youth or prevent them from becoming or developing problems. In addition to cultivating youth's assets, these supports became a way to retain group members.

Political education occurred in workshops or meetings structured to elicit the expertise that youth hold, rooted in their lived experience, while stimulating their development of critical consciousness or their understanding of the ways in which vectors of power, privilege, and oppression operate in society to reproduce inequality and naturalize violence against the most marginalized. Both pedagogically and on a curricular basis, the political education models used in youth organizing programs often drew inspiration from the popular educational techniques that Paulo Freire developed while working to organize illiterate farmworkers in Brazil (Christens & Kirshner, 2011; Conner, 2014; Freire, 1973; Kwon, 2013; Nguyen & Quinn, 2018; Su, 2009).

Finally, organizing strategies involve building a base of people and supporting them to: develop bonds of trust as they discern shared concerns and arrive at consensus about the problems most impacting them and their communities; collectively imagine solutions to those problems; identify decision-makers who could enact those solutions; and, finally, employ a range of tactics intended to pressure these decision-makers to accede to their demands. These tactics may include meetings with policymakers, public testimony, media strategy, and various forms of direct action. As this work is sustained over time, community organizing holds the potential not only to effectuate changes in practice and policy, as groups' demands are met, but also to build the collective power of their members and shift institutional or social power dynamics. An oft-cited definition of youth organizing speaks to this range of intended outcomes: youth organizing is "a youth development and social justice strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change in their communities" (Listen, Inc., 2003, p. 9). As one of the earliest funders in the field, Robert Ross, has noted, youth organizing delivers

a triple bottom line, driving change at three levels: youth, issue, and community (Shah et al., 2018).

Trends in Participation and Focus

Since the 1990s, youth organizing groups have proliferated. In its 2021 field scan, the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) identified 312 youth organizing groups in the US (Valladares et al., 2021). This number represents a more than twofold increase over the previous field scan in 2013, which identified 111 such groups. Concentrated in California but present throughout the country, the groups represented in the 2021 field scan take different forms, focus on different institutions or issue areas, and use different approaches. Slightly more than a third do not have a full-time organizer on staff. While some youth organizing groups are youth-led and youth-run, a growing share (70 percent) is intergenerational, involving youth–adult partnerships and joint work.

Despite this variation, the three core elements discussed previously (developmental supports, political education, and organizing work) remain central. More than 80 percent of the groups surveyed include political education and leadership development activities in their programming, and all groups were pursuing organizing campaigns to change policies, institutions, or systems. As was the case in previous field scans, education reform remains the most common issue area, possibly because education continues to be a universal experience for youth. Education is followed by local issues, such as transportation or city services, and health. Most groups develop a "focus and expertise on a set of primary issues" (Valladares et al., 2021, p. 26) but engage in other issue areas through partnerships with other groups. The most frequently cited "shared issues" were criminal justice, employment, gender/LGBTQ+ rights, and immigrant rights.

Marginalized youth continue to constitute the core leadership of youth organizing groups. Seventy-five percent of the groups surveyed reported significant representation of Latinx or Hispanic youth within their leadership ranks, with 73 percent reporting the same for LGBTQ+ youth and 70 percent for Black or African American youth. More than half of youth organizing groups active in 2020 (53 percent) included high rates of immigrant and refugee youth leaders.

As hinted at previously in the findings about shared issues, an important trend in the field has been the growth in partnership and coalitional work, especially at the national level. An early account of youth organizing identified participation in alliances and networks as a hallmark of this model, distinguishing it from traditional youth leadership or civic engagement programming, but most of these alliances were formed in local communities or across a single state (Listen, Inc., 2003). By 2013, 77 percent of youth organizing groups reported involvement in networks or coalitions, and 82 percent of

them reported involvement at the national level. As the number of youth organizing groups has grown, so too has the share involved in networks and alliances, and now 98 percent of youth organizing groups report such activity. The founding of FCYO in 2000 marked a significant development in this regard, because it created platforms and opportunities for groups to convene, learn from and alongside one another, and form alliances.

The Alliance for Education Justice (AEJ) offers an example. An alliance of twenty-six youth organizing groups, AEJ seeks "to end the war on youth in our schools" (AEJ, n.d.) and to promote a vision of education as liberatory and transformative. The AEJ has authored research reports and toolkits, sent policy proposals to Congress, led trainings in the school-to-prison pipeline, and held days of action, such as that of April 15, 2010, to demand more federal funding for schools (Warren & Kupscznk, 2016). In 2017, AEJ launched its National Campaign for Police Free Schools. Based in abolitionist principles, this long-standing campaign featured a week of action in 2020, headlined by teach-ins, rallies, caravans, and appeals to school boards in cities including New York, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, and Oakland, among others.

An example of an episodic rather than sustained alliance is the collective of youth organizing groups and coalitions that together issued a joint demand letter to President Biden during the final weeks of his 2020 presidential campaign. Authors included such groups as United We Dream, Sunrise Movement, March For Our Lives, Student Action, and the Alliance for Youth Action. The letter outlined a series of policy and personnel demands addressing a wide range of issues, from climate change, gun violence prevention, and immigration to health care, education, and foreign policy. Through coalitions like this, youth organizing groups build their capacity not only to transcend the issue-based or geographic silos that focus their work but also to multiply their collective power.

Until relatively recently, organizing groups with a national presence tended to engage young adults, aged seventeen to twenty-five or eighteen to thirty, while local community-based youth organizing groups focused on middle and high school student populations (Braxton, 2016). These trends were disrupted with the rise of March For Our Lives in 2018 and the Sunrise Movement in 2017, two youth-led groups respectively focused on passing comprehensive gun reform and on the Green New Deal. Both groups engage youth aged twelve to thirty. Additionally, although both draw heavily on the strategies of base building, direct action, and political mobilization, they initially were less attentive to local community issues and youth development principles than traditional youth organizing groups. In yet another departure for the field, they are largely fueled by White middle-class and upper-middle-class youth. Recognizing the limitations of this representation, these two groups have worked to advance a sophisticated intersectional analysis of the root causes and disproportionate effects of gun violence and climate change, respectively. They center social justice in their messaging, programming, and direct actions, and they strive to uplift the leadership of youth of color.

As more youth have become politicized by the horrific mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School or by the escalating climate crisis and find inspiration in the activism of youth like X González and Greta Thunberg, the youth organizing landscape is shifting. Nonetheless, it is important to be clear that not all youth-led organizations exemplify youth organizing, and the terms "organizer" and "activist" are not synonymous. The essential features of youth organizing are that it engages the most marginalized, promotes holistic development, creates meaningful change, and develops a leadership pipeline (Valladares et al., 2020). Organizing, therefore, is a specific model, situated under the broader umbrella category of "activism." Furthermore, while activism is not beholden to any one political ideology, youth organizing groups tend to embrace a radical, justice-oriented social analysis to orient the development of young people's critical consciousness, so these political commitments also distinguish youth organizing from youth activism writ large.

An Example: Asian/Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership

Founded in 1998 in Oakland, California, Asian/Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL) is a youth organizing group that exemplifies these essential features (engaging the most marginalized, promoting holistic development, creating meaningful change, and developing a leadership pipeline). AYPAL draws together young people, aged fourteen to eighteen, from Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Laotian, Mien, Samoan, Tongan, and Vietnamese immigrant and refugee communities. Most are from low-income backgrounds and attend the city's public schools (Kwon, 2013). The mission of AYPAL is to promote social justice, youth community involvement, and youth leadership (Kwon, 2013). On its website, AYPAL boasts that it has supported more than 500 Youth Leaders and engaged over 5,000 young people in grassroots campaigns since its founding (AYPAL, 2021). Moreover, the organization has become a key site for Asian/Pacific Islander (API) youth from diverse backgrounds to come together to critically examine and collectively change the negative conditions that impact their lives, such as everyday anti-Asian racism, the criminalization of API youth, and the gentrification of their neighborhoods.

AYPAL uses a range of programming to attract API youth, build their collective leadership, and involve them in political advocacy and critical action. AYPAL's approach to political education follows Freirean principles of popular education, in which facilitators draw knowledge from participants with the aim of building their critical consciousness, inspiring action, and achieving liberation. Youth interns, who receive modest stipends, plan and lead free workshops twice a week for their peers on topics such as "the

elements of hip-hop" and gentrification (Kwon, 2013, p. 24). AYPAL's pro-gramming activities also include team-building workshops as a means of fostering strong, supportive relationships within the organization. Leadership development occurs through culturally responsive skill-building, organizing campaigns, and collaborative work within and beyond the group. In fact, coalitions have been central to AYPAL since it began as a collective, drawn from six different nonprofits in Oakland (Kwon, 2013). In addition to collaborating with other organizers, such as labor groups, for direct actions, AYPAL has formed partnerships with public agencies and organizations, including the Oakland Unified School District and the statewide Campaign for Quality Education Coalition. Finally, through its Cultural Arts Activism programming, AYPAL celebrates and leverages the creativity of youth chan-gemakers. At a winter Fresh Off the Block (FOB) Youth Art Show and a spring May Arts Festival, youth showcase cultural and artistic products, ranging from fashion to guerrilla theater, that challenge stereotypes and myths about the API community, celebrate traditions, and advance campaign efforts.

Throughout its twenty-six-year history, AYPAL has orchestrated many effective campaigns. Working in coalition with more than twenty local organizations over a two-year period between 2001 and 2003, AYPAL was able to block the planned expansion of a juvenile hall on the outskirts of Oakland (Kwon, 2013). Setting their sights on a federal policy that was adversely impacting the lives of families in the refugee community, AYPAL launched a campaign in 2002 to pressure their congresswoman to sponsor legislation to repeal the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), a bill that facilitated the deportation of refugees who had been previously convicted of a crime, even if they had served their time. Although the congresswoman never met directly with AYPAL, instead assigning her aide to represent her in scheduled meetings with them and sending them video messages of support, she did finally cosponsor a bill in 2004 to repeal IIRIRA (Kwon, 2013).

Other AYPAL campaigns have focused on education, including demanding policies to require an ethnic studies curriculum, the unlocking of bathrooms during passing periods, the dissemination of written grading policies, and the end of police harassment of students in schools (Nygreen et al., 2006). In 2019, AYPAL helped to pass and implement a resolution to disaggregate school and district-wide data by students' ethnicities. Part of the resolution mandated the introduction of new categories on district enrollment forms, such as Tongan and Mien, which had not been previously acknowledged. AYPAL argued persuasively that collecting and then disaggregating data would allow school leaders to better understand the needs of unique populations of students, support them, and convey the message to them that they are seen and belong. Their resolution passed unanimously (Lee, 2019). Over the last two decades, AYPAL has achieved many notable successes while building a strong base of

API young people who are passionate about effecting meaningful changes in Oakland schools and the community.

Power and Empowerment Processes

The goal of building power features prominently in many of the mission statements of youth organizing groups. Indeed, helping youth to learn to exercise their collective power to effect change is a priority of youth organizing. In what follows, I review the research relevant to psychological empowerment and community power. Then, I identify the setting features that facilitate their development.

Psychological Empowerment

The bulk of the research on youth organizing focuses on the gains that accrue to participants as a result of their involvement. Framed in terms of psychological empowerment, these gains can be grouped into affective, behavioral, cognitive, and relational domains (Christens, 2019). Because some of this work examines psychological empowerment outcomes in large samples of youth organizers, representing a range of different groups (Flores, 2020; Rogers & Terriquez, 2016; Watts et al., 2018), it may partially obscure the specific contexts and campaigns in which these outcomes were forged. Nonetheless, the literature does generally accord with Christens's (2019) perspective that psychological empowerment is inextricably bound up in community and organizational empowerment processes. As youth work to change their communities, they change themselves, and these changes are indicative of empowerment processes.

Affective

Because youth organizing requires participants to confront and closely examine systems of oppression and injustice in order to change them, healing justice work has become a core part of many organizing groups (Ginwright, 2010). Health and well-being outcomes have therefore received a good amount of attention in the youth organizing literature (Ginwright, 2015; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2018). For youth from marginalized communities, healing from oppression and trauma is a predicate to healthy development and psychological empowerment.

Recent large-scale quantitative studies have confirmed what smaller, qualitative case studies of youth organizing groups have long suggested: Youth organizing supports the development of valuable emotional competencies, including emotional regulation and self-management or the ability to calibrate emotional responses, take positive risks, and persist through setbacks (Flores,

2020; Watts et al., 2018). In her study of nearly 1,400 youth organizers, Terriquez (2017) found that 84 percent of respondents credited youth organizing with helping them learn to take better care of their emotional well-being.

Research is also clear that youth organizing helps members develop strong feelings of political efficacy (Delgado & Staples, 2008; Kirshner, 2015; Lewis-Charp et al., 2003; Nicholas & Eastmann-Mueller, 2020; Shah, 2011) or belief in their capacity to contribute to collective change efforts (Gambone et al., 2006; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Kirshner, 2015; Moya, 2017). These developmental outcomes are strong signifiers of psychological empowerment. In her study comparing youth organizers to a matched set of peers in more traditional youth development programs, Flores (2020) found that youth organizers developed a significantly greater sense of "contribution" than their peers. Defined as a "young person's ability to make a difference" (Flores, 2020, p. 22), contribution can be compared to notions of sociopolitical control, which entails not only feelings of policy control but also a sense of leadership competence (Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). Numerous studies demonstrate that youth develop leadership skills through their involvement in organizing (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Constanza-Chock et al., 2016; Lewis-Charp et al., 2003; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020). Indeed, creating a generation of leaders poised to transform society is part of the underlying theory of change espoused by many youth organizing groups.

Behavioral

Youth organizing has been theorized as an opportunity structure that catalyzes sociopolitical development (Christens & Kirshner, 2011). A key indicator of such development is critical sociopolitical action, or efforts to bring about more just and equitable communities and institutions (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Researchers have found that as they engage in organizing, youth form strong commitments to taking action (Gambone et al., 2006; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Kirshner, 2015; Moya, 2017; Rogers et al., 2012; Shah, 2011), reflecting the behavioral dimension of psychological empowerment. Studies of youth organizing alumni have revealed that these commitments persist after many years, translating into professional choices as well as civic and political engagement in adulthood (Conner, 2011; Mira, 2013; Nicholas et al., 2019). Compared to a general population, youth organizing alumni were significantly more likely to belong to a political or community-based organization, to have assumed a leadership role in these organizations, to volunteer, to have worked on an issue affecting their community, to have engaged in a protest or rally, and to have registered to vote (Rogers & Terriquez, 2013). Consistent with the notion of a leadership pipeline, these behavioral channels of psychological empowerment feed into ever-larger flows of community power.

Cognitive

If critical sociopolitical action is one hallmark of sociopolitical development, critical consciousness, or a robust understanding of the way social, political, and economic institutions sustain inequality and injustice, is another. A large body of work has demonstrated how youth organizers develop a critical orientation, critical awareness, or critical consciousness through organizing (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Conner, 2014; Curnow et al., 2019; Gambone et al., 2006; Moya, 2017; Nicholas & Eastmann-Mueller, 2020; Quinn & Nguyen, 2017; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Christens et al. (2016) have explicated the conceptual linkages between critical consciousness and psychological empowerment.

Civic knowledge and skills represent another set of learning outcomes that have been well documented by scholars of youth organizing. Civic knowledge includes an understanding of formal politics and schemas for social change (Rogers et al., 2012), while civic skills encompass research skills (e.g., the ability to gather, analyze, and report data), systems-thinking and social analysis skills, public speaking skills, and strategic planning skills (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Delgado & Staples, 2008; Kirshner, 2015; Terriquez et al., 2020). Cultivated in the context of collective political action campaigns, these enhanced skills and understandings reflect the cognitive dimension of psychological empowerment.

Relational

Because relational organizing – member recruitment, relationship-building, mentoring new leaders – is integral to the core work of community organizing, it is not surprising that psychological empowerment processes in youth organizing would involve a relational component. Through organizing, youth develop strong horizontal peer-to-peer relationships (Terriquez et al., 2020) as well as the ability to collaborate productively with other communities (Quinn & Nguyen, 2017). Constanza-Chock et al. (2016) find that through engagement in media-making, youth organizers forge "lasting bonds, inter-generational connections, and community ties" (p. 7). Other work has shown how youth organizers strengthen their social networks and social capital through this work (Baker-Doyle, 2016; Rosen et al., 2018; Yee, 2016). These findings are particularly noteworthy in light of research that shows that youth enter organizing contexts with lower levels of initial social capital than matched peers in other youth development programs (Flores, 2020). As they build relationships within and across youth organizing groups, youth organizers deepen their interpersonal skills, including empathy, listening skills, and the ability to bridge differences (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Flores, 2020; Lewis-Charp et al., 2003; Warren et al., 2008), becoming more empowered change agents and leaders in the process.

Community Power

Theorists have proposed different approaches to conceptualize and empirically measure power at the local or community level. One of the most useful comes from Christens (2019), who, drawing on Lukes (1974), identifies three different dimensions of community power: situational, institutional, and systemic. The situational dimension directs attention to who wins and who loses in public contests over issues. The institutional dimension focuses on which issues are brought to the fore in public debate and which are not. The systemic dimension, meanwhile, concerns how ideology and public opinion are shaped. Mapping findings from the extant literature on youth organizing to this framework helps illuminate the variety of ways in which youth organizers have built community power over the last three decades, during a time of entrenched neoliberalism and ongoing state violence against Black and Brown youth. Although less research on youth organizing has focused on community power than on psychological empowerment processes and outcomes, evidence exists to suggest that youth organizing can build civic capacity to press for and achieve justice-oriented change at the local level.

Situational

An important indicator of the situational dimension of community power is broad participation, both in youth organizing groups and in the collective actions they organize. Mass mobilizations of youth have occurred sporadically over the past three decades and have become particularly visible since 2018, as youth have taken to the streets to demand gun violence prevention, climate action, and racial justice. Certainly, not all of the young people who participated in the youth-led movements of 2018–2020 were members of youth organizing groups, but youth organizing groups were well poised to organize and leverage these collective actions for policy change.

For example, after the killing of George Floyd sparked national protests for police accountability and abolition, several school districts across the country moved to sever their ties with police departments. In many of the places where these changes occurred, youth organizers had been laying the groundwork for years, educating district leaders and the general public about the mechanics and effects of the school-to-prison pipeline, pressing for change, and proposing alternative investments, such as #counselorsnotcops (Warren, 2021). Although the situational dimension of community power draws attention to visible "wins," such as severed police contracts, it obscures the time it takes for groups to mount and sustain pressure campaigns on decision-makers as well as the vigilance required after changes are announced to ensure adequate follow-through. Nonetheless, documenting the wins is a critical step in demonstrating the community power that youth organizing groups have amassed.

In their analysis of the victories reported by youth organizing groups between 2010 and 2012, Braxton et al. (2013) found that wins spanned education justice, immigrant rights, environmental justice, food justice, and health domains. Slightly more than half (57 percent) of the victories were scored at the community level, while 21 percent occurred at the state level, and one victory was reported at the federal level: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which immigrant rights organizers had been working towards, in the form of the Dream Act, since 2000.

Across studies of youth organizing, three kinds of wins have emerged as salient: positive wins, negative wins, and putative or symbolic wins. Although a particular campaign may culminate in all three types of win, the distinctions are useful for empirical purposes.

Positive wins are those that introduce a new idea or involve a new allocation of public funds to areas youth organizers have identified as worthy of invest-ment. Examples include winning the implementation of translational and interpretation services in all Human Service agencies in Rhode Island, the opening of an affordable fresh fruit and vegetable market in Brooklyn, NY, and new curricular mandates, such as a required course in "racial and social justice," which youth organizers were able to secure in one California school district (Braxton et al., 2013). Commitments from city or district leaders to fund new programs for youth is another example of the type of positive wins youth organizers have been able to achieve (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Warren & Mapp, 2011). For instance, youth organizers in Long Beach, Los Angeles, Boston, and Philadelphia were able to secure significant funding for the implementation of Wellness Centers, Health Resource Centers, or Student Success Centers in their high schools (Braxton et al., 2013; Conner et al., 2013).

Negative wins occur when groups successfully block an unwanted policy proposal from passing or repeal or substantially rewrite harmful existing legislation. Negative wins can be seen in youth organizers' successful thwarting of efforts to privatize or permanently shutter schools (Braxton et al., 2013; Conner et al., 2013), expand juvenile hall (Kwon, 2013), cut public vouchers that provide free transportation to and from school (Moore, 2011), and gentrify their neighborhoods (Abad, 2021; Delgado & Staples, 2008). In Illinois, youth organizers led and won a campaign to shut down a series of coal plants across the state (Braxton et al., 2013). Campaigns to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline have also resulted in significant victor-ies, including revoked zero-tolerance policies and rewritten student codes of conduct (Fernandez et al., 2016; Warren, 2018).

A policy change is not the only form of win that youth organizers can attain during publicly visible contests over issues. Youth organizers achieve putative or symbolic wins when they successfully discredit a policymaker or expose the flawed logic in a policymaker's proposal. Through public testimony or con-frontations with policymakers, youth can begin to erode or chip away at the

political power that officials hold (Rosen & Conner, 2021). The youth's power in these moments represents both the situational and systemic dimensions of power, as they not only win the moment of the contest (situational) but also shape public understanding and interpretation of the issue (systemic). When youth organizers from Youth vs Apocalypse confronted Senator Dianne Feinstein in her office about the Green New Deal, Feinstein's response, steeped in adultism, was to dismiss the youth by saying, "I know what I'm doing," implying that they did not, and instructing one of them to run for senate herself so "you can do it your way." The Senator observed that she had recently been reelected by a plurality of voters and that the young people in her office were not among those who had voted for her (because they were too young to do so). During the nearly fifteen-minute interaction, Feinstein moved between dismissing the youth, patronizing them, and attempting to conciliate them by offering one an internship. The viral video of the contest, which has been viewed more than 15.5 million times, represents a symbolic victory for the youth organizers in that their moral power prevailed over Feinstein's entrenched political power, even stimulating a parody sketch of the Senator on *Saturday Night Live*. The video ignited what Sunrise Movement organizers, drawing on the work of Saul Alinsky, call "a moment of the whirlwind" (Engler & Engler, 2016, p. 54), when new attention is driven to a cause and hearts and minds in the broader public shift.

Institutional

The institutional dimension of youth organizers' power can be seen in how they help shape the agenda or highlight issues of concern. Youth organizers use three main approaches to agenda-setting: creating a moment of conflict that compels a response; working cooperatively with policymakers on specific proposals; and participating in conversations with decision-makers before the agenda is fully determined.

Youth organizers use public testimony or direct action, in concert with media strategy, to elevate issues for public debate that might otherwise go unnoticed by adult decision-makers. Often by drawing public attention to the problems they face, youth organizers force the hands of decision-makers, who may appear negligent or callous if they fail to respond in a timely fashion. Oakes and Rogers (2006) recount how youth organizers with Californians for Justice planned an event at a district headquarters, to which they invited the media. At the event, they unveiled photos they had taken of dirty and inoperable school bathrooms, lacking in paper towels, soap, toilet paper, and, in some cases, functional stall doors. The district responded swiftly by increasing custodial staff, passing policies that required daily restroom checks to ensure restrooms were clean and fully stocked, and inviting the health department to perform random inspections. Youth organizers' powerful, often emotional testimony about matters ranging from school overcrowding, outdated or

insufficient textbooks, and mold or vermin in classrooms to hazardous waste sites and displacement due to gentrification have the potential to attract media attention and public outcry, building pressure on policymakers to remedy the problems youth have exposed (Abad, 2021; Gallay et al., 2016).

While youth organizers know how to strike an adversarial posture when agitating for change, they also know how to work cooperatively with decision-makers to advance shared priorities (Su, 2009). In Chicago, during the summer of 2020, a group of youth organizers, united under the hashtag #CopsOutCPS, worked with members of the City Council to draft a #FreePoliceSchools ordinance (Garcia, 2020). Similarly, AYPAL's data dis-aggregation campaign involved working closely with a school board member who authorized their resolution.

In addition to working directly with adult allies or champions who possess institutional or political power, youth organizing groups may help shape the agenda by meeting with policymakers to express their concerns and share ideas. Fifty-seven percent of youth organizing groups in 2020 reported that they regularly scheduled meetings with policymakers as part of their cam-paigns (Valladares et al., 2021). Becoming known and establishing a reputa-tion as engaged stakeholders can lead to invitations to collaborate on initiatives. For example, in Denver, scholars found that Padres y Jóvénes Unidos' successful campaign to redesign a once-struggling school helped youth and adult allies "have an organized voice in educational decisions while district officials invite them to participate in creating and implementing pol-icies, like the district's new restorative justice discipline code" (Warren & Mapp, 2011, p. 262). More recently, over one month before President Biden announced his first series of executive actions related to the "gun violence public health epidemic," the White House invited fourteen youth organizers from groups such as GoodKids MadCity, Youth Over Guns, and March For Our Lives to a virtual discussion on community violence prevention. The readout of the meeting reported that "participants shared their perspectives around the intersectionality of gun violence, how to craft successful community-based violence interventions, and the importance of survivor-led and victim-centered policymaking in the community violence prevention space" (The White House, 2021). The fact that these groups were given a seat at the table is a testament to the organizational power they have built and evidence of the institutional dimension of their community power.

Systemic

The systemic dimension of community power is the most difficult to document empirically, as it can be hard to tie changes in public opinion directly to youth organizing groups' efforts; however, the prevalence of the counternarrating or *testimonio* strategy in youth organizing suggests that these groups often work to "flip the script" and disrupt mainstream understandings of them, the

policies that affect them, and the institutions that shape their lives (Conner & Rosen, 2016). At a national level, youth organizers in the immigrant rights struggle have been particularly adept at reframing undocumented youth from illegal immigrants or aliens to DREAMERs, innocents with limitless potential (Terriquez, 2015). Negron-Gonzalez (2016) argues that through acts of civil disobedience immigrant youth organizers have further leveraged the DREAMER frame to shape the national debate on belonging, deservingness, and "illegality," laying the groundwork for the Obama administration to pass DACA. At the community level, youth organizers have likewise advanced alternative frames to challenge prevailing ideology. For example, to counter a media narrative that characterized Black youth as violent, rampaging thugs, the Philadelphia Student Union staged an action in a public square in a wealthy area of the city, in which they arranged themselves in a tight, organized formation and recited a call-and-response chant that drew attention to their identities as leaders, thinkers, innovators, organizers, artists, and as a youth movement (Conner & Rosen, 2015). Their action was designed to shift public perceptions of Black youth.

In addition to shaping public perceptions of them, youth organizers work to change prevailing policy narratives. For example, Sinclair-Lewis and Rodriguez (2021) identify various frames used by youth organizers with the Black Swan Academy (BSA) in Washington, DC, as they attempted to influence public interpretations of the policy changes needed following the murder of George Floyd. In their public-facing political education work and their pressure campaigns on elected officials, they cast the police as a racist institution, called for funds to be invested in youth's needs, and put forward reimagined conceptions of safety. Because of the effectiveness of these frames, Sinclair-Lewis and Rodriguez (2021) argue, the media, elected officials, and other community leaders credited BSA with achieving small-scale policy wins, including the DC State Board of Education passing a resolution for police-free schools, the DC Council voting to change who controls the hiring of police officers in schools, and the creation of a DC Police Reform Commission. The systemic and situational dimensions of their community power, therefore, interacted to bolster one another.

Setting Features That Facilitate Empowerment Processes

There is little doubt that the three core programmatic features identified at the outset of this chapter – developmental supports, political education, and organizing work – redound to the psychological empowerment and community power outcomes described previously. Developmental supports (e.g., healing circles) scaffold affective and relational empowerment outcomes, while political education enhances cognitive empowerment outcomes, particularly the development of critical consciousness and critical thinking skills. Meanwhile, organizing work is instrumental to developing civic knowledge

and skills as well as lasting changes in civic commitments and behaviors. Organizing campaigns likewise foster community power, as meetings with policymakers, direct actions, media strategy, and public testimony can help shape the agenda, influence public opinion, and catalyze policy change.

Most of the research on psychological empowerment has focused on the impacts of internal program meetings, workshops, and in-house programming, while most of the work on community power has concentrated on the effects of engaging in visible public actions; however, in effective youth organizing models, these internal and external setting types are inextricably linked. Therefore, isolating the effect of participation in actions relative to planning meetings or listening sessions is impractical. Nonetheless, because organizing groups may emphasize different elements, with some foregrounding internal healing justice work and others focusing more heavily on policy advocacy, future research could examine the differential impacts of these varied approaches.

In addition to the three core programmatic elements or setting types, researchers have identified other signature characteristics of youth organizing that facilitate empowerment processes. Again, the bulk of this research and theorizing focuses on setting features that inure to the benefit of the youth members. Researchers have found that youth organizing offers a potent site for learning because it enables young people to address problems that are directly *relevant* to their lives (Conner, 2014; Rogers et al., 2012; Watts et al., 2018). As they engage with these problems, youth organizers participate in an *experiential learning cycle*, which entails stages of research and preparation, analysis, authentic action or performance, and reflection (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Watts et al., 2018). The *critical orientation* of this cycle and the learning environment in general, with its explicit attention to internal as well as external dynamics of power and privilege, has also often been cited as influential in shaping youth organizers' experiences and outcomes (Nguyen & Quinn, 2018; Rogers et al., 2012; Su, 2009). Finally, scholars have highlighted the unique opportunities that youth organizing groups present for *accelerated, collectivist leadership* (Govan et al., 2015; Rosen, 2019; Rosen & Conner, 2016; Watts et al., 2018) and *authentic, caring relationships* with both adults and other youth (Christens & Kirshner, 2011; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Watts et al., 2018) as distinctive setting features integral to youth organizing groups' success in attracting and retaining members. Researchers have also studied the power-sharing norms and social practices that contribute to a supportive organizational culture, in which all members' contributions are valued and affirmed (Nicholas & Eastmann-Mueller, 2020; Rosen, 2016). Additionally, they have examined how this deep cultural work shapes values, collective identity, and a sense of shared fate among organizational members (Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Because community power cannot exist without psychological empowerment, and vice versa, it seems reasonable to assume that the same setting features discussed previously contribute to community power; however,

comparatively little research has examined the mechanics of community empowerment processes in youth organizing and the features of the groups that have proven most adept at setting the agenda, achieving policy victories, and (re)shaping public opinion. From anecdotal evidence, we know that youth organizing groups do not need to be long-standing to earn a seat at the policy table; they do not need to be intergenerational or have adult staff to stage powerful direct actions that create "moments of the whirlwind"; and they do not need to be large in size to score critical policy wins. As discussed subsequently, more research is needed to identify the cross-cutting features of youth organizing groups that are associated with generating and sustaining community power.

Relatedly, more attention could be paid to the broader contextual features that shape how these groups operate. The challenges youth face in contesting neoliberalism have been well elucidated (Conner & Rosen, 2016; Kennelly, 2011; Kwon, 2013), as have the challenges of philanthropic dependency amid funding vicissitudes (Braxton et al., 2013). Case studies of youth organizing campaigns have revealed the opportunities and constraints that arise in a specific community at a specific moment in time to facilitate or stymie a campaign's success. Nonetheless, more comparative and longitudinal research is needed to illuminate how the broader sociopolitical environment, through both its institutions and its prevailing ideology, creates enabling or constraining conditions for youth organizing. Such research could trace the evolution of various youth organizing ecosystems over time as they impact the political will and capacity of a community to take youth's concerns seriously.

Application

The research reviewed in the previous sections raises implications for youth activists, funders, and youth organizing groups.

Generation Z has been heralded for its unusually high levels of critical social attunement and political engagement. Some research has linked this generation's unprecedented voter turnout levels in the US in 2018 and 2020 to the surge in youth activism since 2018 (CIRCLE, 2021). While the March For Our Lives marches in 2018, the climate strikes that preceded the UN General Assembly in 2019, and the racial justice protests in the summer of 2020 were among the largest youth mobilizations in history, the narrative of the surge in youth activism elides the work that youth organizing groups have been doing for decades, often in these same issue areas.

As more young people turn to activism, create nonprofit organizations (i.e., 501(c)(3)s), and/or adopt the term "organizer," there are a few lessons to be gleaned from the youth organizing groups that have been engaged in these struggles for many years. The most sacrosanct of the first principles of youth organizing is that the leadership of youth with marginalized identities matters.

Youth organizing rests on the premise that those most directly impacted must take the lead in naming the problems, designing the solutions, and mounting collective action to demand change. This is not to say that there is no role for White, middle-class and upper-middle-class youth in the struggle; solidarity across groups with different social identities is critical. However, before attempting to launch a new activist-oriented nonprofit organization, aspiring youth activists might want to survey the local youth organizing landscape, identify those groups that have already been working in this space, particularly in their local community, and lift up or take cues from their leadership, adopting for themselves roles as allies or accomplices.

Similarly, funders should prioritize investing in groups that center the leadership of low-income youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and immigrant or refugee youth, while recognizing that these groups might not always have the internal capacity to generate competitive proposals. Writing a grant proposal or funders' report is not always the best use of organizers' time. In the past few years, funding for youth activism, advocacy, and electoral work has significantly increased, but these resources have not always reached the groups that are led by youth most impacted by racism and poverty. A lack of access to funding has caused some attrition in the youth organizing field. Furthermore, the funding that does reach youth organizing groups does not always provide them with runways long enough to step back from the frantic pace of organizing to engage in deep visioning or strategic planning work. Funders interested in building the transformative leadership of youth subjugated by oppression must recognize that the work of psychological and community empowerment takes time as well as sufficient resources.

Finally, organizers must be prepared to confront numerous tensions as they undertake this work. The dynamic interplay between psychological and community empowerment means that youth organizing groups must be attentive to balancing both processes. Some of the youth activist groups that have recently burst onto the scene have been so determined to build social power and achieve policy change that they have been slower to develop robust developmental supports and political education programming. Focusing solely on mobilizing the base and policy advocacy, to the exclusion of youth development, healing, and consciousness raising, may lead to a cycle of burnout, atrophying membership, and failed or flawed policy recommendations that are not grounded in a deep critical social analysis. Although in theory "youth leadership development and community development through youth organizing [are] two sides of the same coin," real tensions between the two imperatives can play out in practice (Christens & Dolan, 2011, p. 542). Therefore, it is critical, as Christens and Dolan (2011) note, to enact "cycles of organizing and leadership development" (p. 542) in ways that do not privilege one goal above the other but rather understand both processes as interdependent and equally deserving of investments of time, energy, and material resources (Warren & Mapp, 2011).

As they seek to build durable power, youth organizers must be prepared to address an array of additional challenges. One constant threat is adultism, which can manifest as a "double-edged sword" by which youth are discounted either as the pawns of adults and crisis actors or as idealistic dilettantes who do not fully understand the complexities of institutional change (Conner, 2016). Relatedly, the role and responsibilities of adults in youth-led groups can sometimes give rise to tension or controversy, especially when there is disagreement about how to proceed with a campaign. How to support older youth as they age through and eventually out of youth-led organizations presents yet another difficulty, as pathways to other intergenerational or adult organizing groups may not be well articulated. Furthermore, staff can be strained as they try to organize *and* meet the complex needs of youth living in under-resourced communities beset by a host of structural problems. In many cases, staff become the main points of contact for youth experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, abuse, threats of deportation, or generational trauma. For these reasons, leadership development for staff has been identified as a pressing need in the field (Valladares et al., 2021).

Future Research

At least four productive avenues for future research emerge from this review. First, as the field has grown and the population of youth organizers has further diversified in age, geographic region, gender, and along other identity markers, it becomes possible to explore questions about whether all youth benefit equally from organizing or whether youth with certain identities are more likely to benefit than others. Although case studies have elucidated the transformational impact of organizing on distinct groups of youth organizers, such as LGBTQ+, undocumented, and immigrant and refugee youth, variance in empowerment outcomes has yet to be examined, especially in large-scale survey data.

The field would likewise benefit from empirical evidence that examines the shared setting features that distinguish groups that have been particularly effective in building and sustaining community power across issues areas and geographic contexts. How do different youth organizing approaches and group features, like their size or structure, relate to the scope and scale of the victories they achieve situationally, institutionally, and systemically? Because much of the literature to date has focused on building the field and providing evidence of the effectiveness of youth organizing, less attention has been paid to questions of why some groups fold, why some groups gain traction while others do not, and how groups manage internal conflicts and even crises of leadership. In order to draw more robust implications for practice, it is important to begin surfacing the lessons from negative cases and comparing the design elements of groups that are more and less successful

in building a base, carrying out campaigns, and accomplishing the individual, institutional, and systemic changes they seek.

Third, the rise in alliances and coalitions, especially at the national level, presents a rich opportunity to study how learning happens within these networks and shapes the development of community power. How does collaboration with groups from different states or communities influence local organizing work and community empowerment processes? How do groups borrow from and build on one another's efforts? Under what conditions do coalitions of groups with various levels of community power collectively achieve broader social power?

Finally, more research is needed on youth organizing in non-Western (Tivaringe & Kirshner, 2021) and nondemocratic contexts. By examining youth organizing in geopolitical settings other than Canada and the US, researchers will build a broader, but more contextually attuned understanding of the processes, challenges, and transformative possibilities of youth organizing. What factors facilitate and impede youth organizing in various political economies, and what role does civil society play in supporting youth organizing? How have social media and digital organizing contributed to transnational movements, and how have these movements been enacted by local organizers on the ground in different communities around the world? These and related questions offer promising lines for future inquiry.

A popular chant at youth-led protests asserts, "Ain't no power like the power of youth, cuz the power of youth don't quit." Over the last two and half decades, the youth organizing field appears to have borne out this prophetic vision. Their power is demonstrable, worthy of further empirical study, and as needed now as ever to address the pressing social issues of our day.

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