Developmental Trajectories of Civic Engagement across Childhood and Adolescence: Exploring Racial/Ethnic Group Differences

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ROOTS of ENGAGED
CITIZENSHIP PROJECT

Introduction

Developmental change is best understood when situated in social and cultural context (Lerner et al., 2015).

Social responsibility (values of helping others and fair treatment) and **critical consciousness** (beliefs that America is not always fair or equal) are foundational to youth's development of a social justice orientation.

Social responsibility decreases in middle adolescence and shows upward growth thereafter (Wray-Lake, Syvertsen, & Flanagan, 2016), yet racial/ethnic group differences have not been examined.

Research on **critical consciousness** primarily emphasizes ethnic minority youth's social analysis of inequality, efficacy, and actions (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Yet, developmental changes have not been examined.
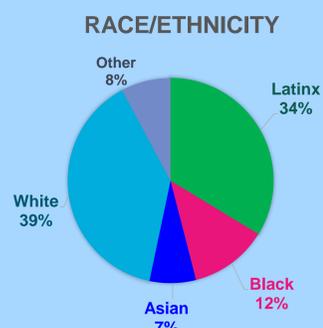
Due to experiences of discrimination and exposure to racial socialization (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012), ethnic minority youth may have more accelerated growth trajectories of social responsibility and critical consciousness.

Study Aims
1. Estimate age-related change in social responsibility and critical consciousness across ages 9-19, using an accelerated cohort design.

2. Determine racial/ethnic differences in social responsibility and critical consciousness trajectories.

Method

We use three annual waves of data from a large, sociodemographically and ethnically diverse sample of 4th-12th grade youth in California, West Virginia, and Minnesota (N = 4233, 55% female). 24% of youth had 2 data waves; 7% had 3 waves.

RACE/ETHNICITY

Other 8%
Latinx 34%
White 39%
Black 12%
Asian 7%

MEASURES
Critical Consciousness (ω_1 = .77; ω_2 = .66, ω_3 = .60; Flanagan et al., 2007; 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*)

In America, some groups do not have equal chances to participate in government.
In America, political leaders only listen to the opinions of certain groups.
In America, certain groups have fewer chances to get ahead.

Social Responsibility (ω_1 = .77; ω_2 = .87, ω_3 = .87; Flanagan et al., 2007; 1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *extremely important*)

It is important to me to consider the needs of other people.
It is important to me to help those who are less fortunate.
It is important to me to make sure that all people are treated fairly.
It is important to me to think about how my actions affect people in the future.

Family Financial Security (single item): 1 = hard time, 2=just enough money, no problem buying things we need, 4=enough money to buy almost everything we want.
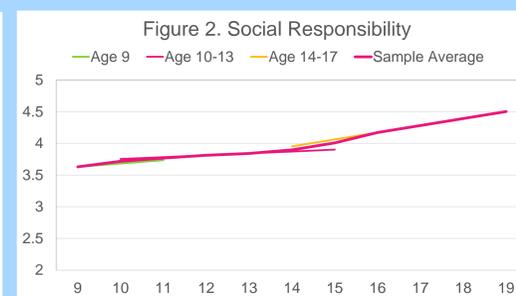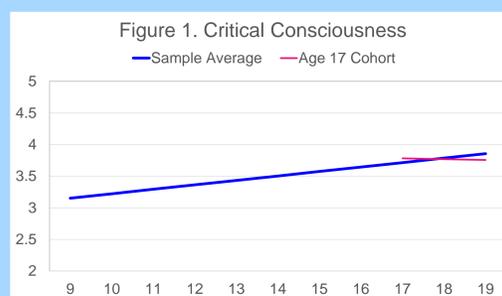
Results

Analytic Strategy
- We used M*plus* to estimate separate latent growth curves for each Wave 1 age group (i.e., cohort; 9-17; 9 groups) that span ages 9-19 longitudinally.
- Multigroup models tested for age differences in growth parameters; age cohort patterns can approximate longer-term longitudinal growth (Duncan & Duncan, 2012).
- Black, Latinx, Other Ethnic Minority (White=reference) ethnic groups, gender, and family financial security were predictors of intercepts and slopes.

Developmental Pattern for Overall Sample
Critical consciousness showed a positive linear trend from 9 to 19, indicated by a significant positive slope that was consistent across age cohorts (Figure 1). Age 17 cohort differed in intercept and slope, suggesting that critical consciousness may flatten out for some youth in late adolescence.

Social responsibility showed three different slopes by age groups in multigroup model comparisons. These slopes form a non-linear pattern of change: Social responsibility showed no growth in late childhood, modest growth across middle adolescence, and steeper growth in adolescence (Figure 2).
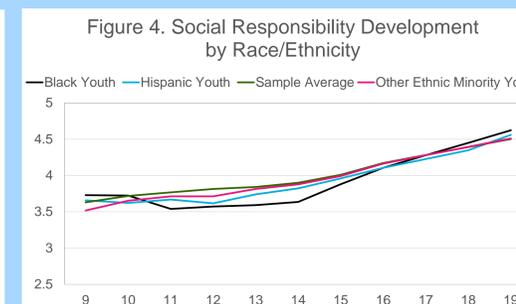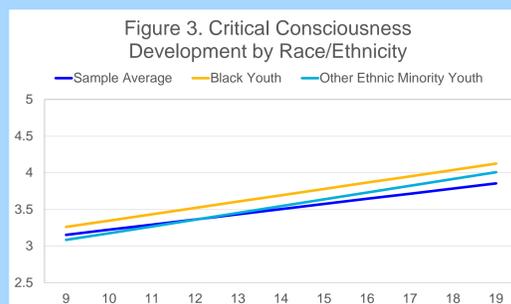

Figure 1. Critical Consciousness
— Sample Average — Age 17 Cohort

Figure 2. Social Responsibility
— Age 9 — Age 10-13 — Age 14-17 — Sample Average

Race/Ethnicity Differences in Trajectories
Critical Consciousness (Figure 3)
- Black youth reported higher critical consciousness across adolescence, compared to White youth.
- Other ethnic minority youth started lower on critical consciousness, but increased faster than White youth after age 13.
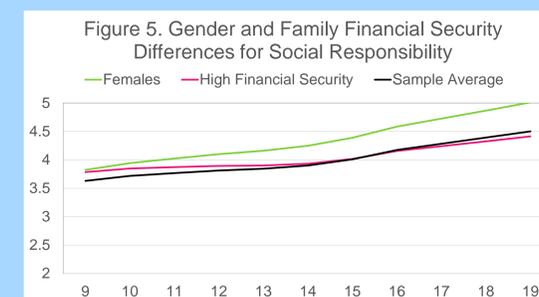
Social Responsibility (Figure 4)
- As shown by three different age cohort slopes, Black youth dipped in social responsibility between ages 11-14 and increased positively thereafter. A similar but less pronounced pattern was found for Latinx youth.
- Other ethnic minority youth were lower than White youth on social responsibility until age 12.

Figure 3. Critical Consciousness Development by Race/Ethnicity
— Sample Average — Black Youth — Other Ethnic Minority Youth

Figure 4. Social Responsibility Development by Race/Ethnicity
— Black Youth — Hispanic Youth — Sample Average — Other Ethnic Minority Youth

Results

Gender and Family Financial Security Findings
- Females were consistently higher on critical consciousness and social responsibility than males.
- Youth reporting high family financial security started higher on critical consciousness and social responsibility, but showed slower growth over time, converging with the sample average in later adolescence.
- Findings were stronger for social responsibility and are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Gender and Family Financial Security Differences for Social Responsibility
— Females — High Financial Security — Sample Average

Discussion

- Critical consciousness increased with age, showing that adolescents have a growing recognition of unfairness in society. Beliefs about inequality are only one aspect of critical consciousness, and more research is needed that expands on the conditions under which these beliefs translate into civic actions (Watts et al., 2011).

- Black youth started and remained higher on critical consciousness across adolescence. For Black youth, critical consciousness can be a step toward healing from systematical oppression (Ginwright, 2010) and help youth break the cycle of disadvantage (Diemer & Blustein, 2006).

- Previous research showed that social responsibility declined in the middle school years – declines that have been partly attributed to less supportive social contexts. We found declining social responsibility primarily for Black and Latinx youth; perhaps they perceive less support from social or societal contexts during the middle school years, an idea to be further explored.

- Future research could explore how the development of social responsibility and critical consciousness is intertwined with ethnic identity development and informed by cultural values and experiences of injustice.

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