Youth Involvement in the Modern Civil Rights Movement

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**Preface**

At the beginning of the semester, I began working with the Youth Civil Rights Academy on a project for the Wayne State University Honors College. The Youth Civil Rights Academy, as headed by Dr. Barry Checkoway from University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, works to prepare young people to become civil rights leaders in Michigan schools and communities. This community organization also aims to inspire and educate youth. To fulfill part of the Academy’s goals, I began a project concerning “the modern civil rights movement as an everyday experience in the lives of youth.” My time was spent planning and facilitating the project, which included focus groups at local Michigan high schools in regards to the topic. After researching focus group designs and youth involvement in the modern civil rights movement, I formulated questions to ask the students at their respective high schools.

**Introduction**

This report summarizes focus group findings conducted as an independent project with The Youth Civil Rights Academy in Michigan. Findings are based on focus groups that were conducted during November and December of 2015. These groups were aimed at starting a dialogue about the modern civil rights movement and civil rights issues that affect the lives of the students. They explored the modern civil rights movement as an everyday experience in the lives of youth as well as youth perspective on the idea of young leaders at the forefront of social and political movements. During this dialogue, it was expected to identify whether or not youth feel that they have the power to affect change in the world and how they envision themselves doing so. A main point of interest concerned how race affected the students’ perception of their ability to change societal issues and impact future generations. Additionally, expected findings included how students understand civil rights and their importance in American society. The questions were designed to inspire thought regarding contemporary civil rights issues and cause students to consider their pivotal role in the future of the country and world.

**Methods**

This project, as a glance into the lives of youth in contemporary society, included focus groups at local Michigan high schools in the greater metro-Detroit area. After independently contacting over twelve high schools in the area, three schools were able to schedule focus groups either before or after daily classes. University Prep High School (Detroit), Garden City High School (Garden City), and Divine Child High School (Dearborn) students participated in this study. Principals, assistant principals, secretaries, and faculty members were contacted via email and phone in order to schedule these groups The focus groups included ten students from each school, and the students (as they are in high school) are between the ages of 14 and 18. The focus groups lasted an hour each and took place either before or after school in order to accommodate the schedules of the respective schools. The groups were anonymous, but the races of the participants were recorded on paper surveys at the beginning of the focus group sessions. In regards to documentation of the focus groups, the discussions were recorded on an iPhone on the “Voice Memos” app, and complete notes on the recordings were taken at a later date. There were nine questions that were designed to stimulate and influence the thinking and sharing of the participants (Table 1).

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| *Table 1: Focus Group Questions* |
| 1. What comes to mind initially when you are asked what civil rights are? 2. What is the importance of civil rights?3. What makes something a (civil rights) movement (past and/or contemporary)?​4. Which civil rights issues do you see in contemporary society​ as being the most important (either to you personally or in general)​? ​And Why?5. ​Who has been at the forefront of movements?​​​ ​6. Do you see yourself as being one of them? Why/Why not?7. Why is youth involvement important in social movements? 8. How do you envision yourself standing up for your rights in the contemporary world?9. How would you start a movement? Think about previous methods employed in successful movements.  |

The first two questions were designed to stimulate thought about civil rights movements in general and the rationale behind such movements. The third question provokes thoughts about the cause of civil rights movements and the components of successful movements. The fourth one addresses issues that youth view as significant in everyday life and their personal experiences and/or perspectives that lend to the importance of the issue(s) in their lives. Contemporary issues may include discrimination, LGBT rights, gender inequality, marriage equality, wage inequality, immigration rights, health care, fight for racial equality, mass incarceration, police brutality, etc., but these issues were not discussed prior to the asking of this question. The fifth question is aimed at identifying which types of people that youth view as the leaders of these movements. Expected responses include the names of actual leaders or simply traits such as age, gender, race, personal characteristics, etc. that are associated with perceived leaders of social movements. This question acts as a segue to the sixth question, which identifies whether or not the students believe that they have the leadership skills and power to start a movement. The sixth question is at the heart of this project, as the students’ responses demonstrate how they view themselves, as young people, as having an impact on contemporary society. While many factors may contribute to why they do or do not see themselves as young leaders in society, the question was designed to determine a general trend. The seventh question asks students to think about young people in social movements and their role in gaining traction for the movement and inspiring peers to follow. The eighth question causes students to think about how they would personally fight for their rights. Students should consider issues that affect their lives and how they would seek to change the establishment or amend any inequalities that they observe. The final question causes youth to brainstorm methods that they would use to start their own movement. Students are expected to consider previous practices, such as protests, meetings, sit-ins, boycotts, etc., that contributed to the furtherance of social movements, and apply those to a proposed movement in the contemporary world.

**Results**

Refer to Table 1 for the questions.

Question 1:

The majority of responses included terms associated with the Civil Rights Movement of the1960s. Respondents mentioned Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks as historical figures and noted that civil rights are “rights that people who live in America have, just for being citizens.” Civil rights were said to provide “equalities for everyone” and act as people’s protected rights and freedoms. The majority of responses discussed racism and the issue of inequality between different races.

Question 2:

Students answering this question tended to speak more from their educational experience rather than from their personal experience involving civil rights. All of the students agreed that civil rights are important because they “make sure everyone is treated fairly,” but the majority of participants spoke of civil rights in theory rather than in direct relation to their everyday lives.

Question 3:

The students from University Prep Academy understood the formula for a movement better than the other two schools in this study. Participants from UPA agreed that a civil rights movement involves having a purpose, working to gain a civil liberty that is denied to a specific group of people, and striving for equal rights and protections in the world. The other schools, however, addressed the physical appearance of a movement rather than the cause of the said movement. Those students described movements as having signs and protests, but overlooked the reasoning behind creation of a movement. The majority of participants viewed movements as collaborations between like-minded individuals. Additionally, the discussion of what constitutes a successful movement developed in all of the focus groups. About three-fourths of respondents thought that a successful movement is one that achieves the desired goal and changes society, while one-fourth of respondents believed that a successful movement doesn’t necessarily achieve the ultimate goal but does bring awareness to the issue. A discussion of whether or not issues are making progress in society also developed. A majority of students seemed to agree that, although laws have changed in order to prevent discrimination and certain inequalities, people still hold opinions that are difficult to change. A few students recognized the legalization of gay marriage as one of these issues. One student aptly noted that “it takes generations to make these changes accepted.”

Question 4:

When discussing important civil rights issues in the lives of the participants, race majorly influenced the responses. An overwhelming majority of black students cited the Black Lives Matter movement and racial inequalities regarding police brutality as relevant civil rights issues in their lives. Discussions included the dissolution of racist stereotypes and the perceived increase of police brutality in recent times. The Black Lives Matter movement and the issue of police brutality were said to be important because they fight for equality among the races and disproportionately affect young Blacks, respectively. There was a greater variety of responses from non-black students. Responses included issues of sexism, racism, religious genocide, wage inequality, gender inequality, and discrimination against the LGBT community. Whereas the majority of black students spoke about racial issues in the context of their own lives and provided reasons as to why these issues were relevant, non-black students saw the issues that they discussed as being the most important because of media coverage and public knowledge of the societal problem. In this case, the majority of non-black students were more detached from the civil rights issues that they mentioned than the black students who cited personal reasons for the importance of their discussed issues. A small number of respondents did not “keep up with the news,” so they abstained from discussion of this question.

Question 5:

The majority of students in the focus groups imagined strong, determined, and powerful people as leaders of movements. For this question, it appears that race influenced the perception of movement leaders. While participants agreed that strong leaders are vital to enact social change, the majority of black students saw strong black leaders at the forefront of movements, while non-black students overwhelmingly mentioned the influence of celebrities and public figures in the advancement of social causes. A majority of black participants mentioned young black students (both high school and college) and young black men and women in their 20s as being at the forefront of movements. Non-black students, however, mentioned how celebrities like Emma Watson-- who serves as the public face of the HeForShe movement-- use their celebrity status to “spread the word about social issues.” The majority of non-black participants felt that famous public figures have a higher chance of affecting societal change due to their celebrity status, which “causes people to pay attention.” A few students named Malala Yousafzai-- a young leader of human rights advocacy for education in Pakistan-- as being an influential and inspirational figure in a movement. None of the non-black students mentioned black leaders as being at the forefront of contemporary movements.

Question 6:

Data analysis reveals that 60% of participants *did not* see themselves as being future leaders of a movement. To explain their answers, respondents cited not being articulate enough, not feeling strongly about one particular issue, not having the drive and willpower to accomplish such a goal, not having a strong following, and receiving critical reception from people who disagree with the movement, as reasons for failing to see themselves in future leadership roles. However, of the 40% of participants who *did* see themselves potentially leading a social movement, the majority identified as black. To better explain their answers, participants cited seeing a need for social change, easily inspiring others, being involved in debate, taking charge in situations where people want change but expect someone else to do it, feeling strongly about their rights as a citizen, and being passionate about societal equality, as reasons to become leaders.

Question 7:

All participants agreed that youth involvement in social movements is important because their generation has the power to affect change in the future. Students noted that “youth are the face of change and the nation’s future [regarding change],” future progress is in the hands of their generation, and that young leaders can inspire other young people to become involved. A few students in two of the focus groups discussed how adults “freak out” when they see young people on television. They further explained this observation as the older generation of people fearing social change initiated by newer generations.

Question 8:

A majority of students named classic actions of movements, such as initiating protests, starting petitions, and giving speeches, as ways in which they envision themselves standing up for their rights in the modern world. Because social media is easily accessible, many students believed that posting on social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) would be their first step in voicing their opinion if an injustice were to present itself. Posting videos of an injustice on social media or contacting a local news station were ideas discussed by a few participants. Also, a couple of black students mentioned how they would carefully choose their actions so as not to appear “stereotypical.” They wanted to challenge stereotypes and alter images of black people. Discussion of stereotypes did not occur among non-black participants.

Question 9:

Much like the previous question, participants discussed the typical components of movements (protests, etc.). The use of social media to start campaigns was mentioned by quite a few students, but they were then forced to imagine starting a movement without the use of social media. As they considered real-life movements, a majority of the students formulated plans that involved gathering societal support from peers and like-minded people. From “gathering others who are just as passionate” to “getting a lot of people to agree” with them, participants in the focus groups brainstormed groundwork efforts to begin a movement. These included starting clubs or organizations centered on a specific issue, handing out flyers to students and members of the community, and spreading awareness about a cause by giving speeches to the student body.

**Discussion**

The main findings in this report highlight the intersectionality of race and age in youth’s perceptions of the modern civil rights movement and their ability to affect change in the world. Although young people are cognizant of the importance of civil rights, many participants viewed “civil rights” as a theoretical concept rather than a factor that affects their everyday lives. Whereas the majority of black students spoke about racial issues in the context of their own lives and provided reasons as to why these issues were relevant, non-black students saw the issues that they discussed as being the most important because of media coverage and public knowledge of the societal problem. The majority of non-black students appeared more detached from the civil rights issues that they mentioned than the black students who cited personal reasons for their understanding of issues that were important to them. By viewing “civil rights” as a textbook definition, students may fail to recognize the impact that civil rights (or the lack thereof) have on their lives and the lives of others. When discussing the importance of civil rights, non-black students tended to conceptualize rather than speak from personal experience. The perception of civil rights in this manner is most likely caused by years of social studies and history classes where the theory is presented, but real, in-depth life application to the theory is not. Thinking of civil rights and civil rights movements in terms of actual application encourages students to both analyze modern society and recognize when people’s civil rights are impinged upon in everyday life. However, students did seem to recognize that laws that work to eliminate discrimination and ensure civil rights signal progress in the country but do not always lead to equal treatment of the individuals affected by the laws. The legalization of gay marriage was discussed in relation to this. One participant stated:

“People like [Kim Davis] still reject the law, even though gay marriage is legal in the country. Laws are becoming more equal, but you can’t change people’s opinions. Well you can, but it takes generations to make these changes accepted.”

It was impressive to see students recognize that injustices still exist in the world regardless of laws that work to combat such inequalities.

The intersectionality of race and age is also shown by the participants’ perceptions of leaders at the forefront of movements. Students from all of the focus groups agreed on the personal characteristics that a leader would possess (strong, determined, powerful speaking, etc.), but it appears that race influenced the perception of movement leaders. The majority of black participants saw young black men and women at the forefront of these movements, while non-black students were quick to acknowledge the role that celebrities and the media have on social movements. As the majority of black students cited Black Lives Matter as the most important movement in contemporary society (in another discussion), it appears that the leaders who they describe are from this movement. Another factor that may have influenced the participants’ descriptions of leaders is the media’s portrayal of movements. Roughly half of the participants noted the role that celebrities play in promoting movements or speaking out against inequalities. Because celebrities’ actions and causes that promote are heavily publicized, media coverage has the power to drive an issue to the forefront of the public agenda. This entire discussion of leaders at the forefront of movements may connect to the participants’ visualization of themselves as young leaders.

The participants’ perceptions of leaders at the forefront of current movements appears to influence their belief in their own abilities to be young leaders of a movement. In the study, a majority of black participants saw young, black men and women-- like themselves-- at the forefront of important contemporary movements, and a majority of participants who could envision themselves as potential young leaders identified as black. It may appear that seeing examples of young people in leadership roles causes students to feel as if they have a greater ability to affect change. However, a reappearing concern for black students considering a leadership role was the fear of being stereotyped. Multiple participants mentioned challenging stereotypes by “being as calm as possible and not giving people the reaction they expect.” It is disheartening to see the fear of being stereotyped already ingrained in the perception of how these students see themselves. One girl stated:

“As soon as a black person is loud or ignorant, people say ‘that’s why stereotypes exist.’ But no, that’s not why. They exist because someone started to generalize an entire group of people based solely off their skin color.”

While stereotyping was an issue for some students, observing a strong leader who they can identify with in terms of goals, appearance, or any other factors, can be a force in how they view their own ability to influence the world. The majority of students who cited celebrity involvement and media coverage as main factors in promoting movements, did not see themselves as able to lead such a movement. When comparing the popularity and widespread public coverage that a celebrity receives to the initial following of a young person in high school, the thought of successfully leading a movement appears unattainable. As the media so heavily influences people’s perceptions of the world, the media should work toward promoting and showcasing young leaders in order to inspire younger generations to follow their example. Additionally, it was curious that, however the participants envisioned starting their own social movement, none of the participants mentioned party politics or the ability of political parties to further a movement. This could have implications for future voter apathy and the growing indifference toward the two-party political system in this country and its ability to advance a cause.

Passion or the lack thereof was another factor that affected participants’ abilities to see themselves at the forefront of a movement. For the students who felt that they could enact change as a young leader, the majority felt that they had a deep concern about the issues that affect them. Students who could not see themselves as young leaders mainly cited “not believing in anything strong enough” and “not having the drive or willpower to do it.” Interestingly, one participant explained his answer by concluding that he doesn’t “have a lot that [he’s] discriminated against.” This developed into a discussion of white privilege, and many of the non-white students in the group acknowledged that they aren’t passionate about some issues because they don’t face discrimination in society. This raises the question: if students feel that they can’t be passionate about an issue because it doesn’t affect them directly, then what is the implication for allyhood?

Students were shown to be cognizant of civil rights as an important force in the country, but many viewed “civil rights” in theory rather than in its relation to their everyday lives. The repeated discussion of the media demonstrates its vital role in public perception of movements and even its influence on how young people see themselves as leaders. The intersectionality of race and age is displayed as the majority of black students envisioned themselves as potential leaders. This can be connected to the young black men and women who they see as leading examples in social movements. Additionally, passion and the drive to enact change are significant factors in people’s motivations to work toward equality. Unfortunately, students who feel that they are not discriminated against were reluctant to work with issues that affect others, which may present a serious implication for allyhood.