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Reasons youth engage in activism programs: Social justice or sanctuary?

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ABSTRACT

Youth activism programs have been studied for their impact on societal change and their contribution to youth development; however, less is known about what motivates youth to engage in such programs. In this study, we draw on survey and focus group data from eight youth activism programs to understand reasons that youth attend. We find that engaging in social justice work was the highest rated reason for participation, followed closely by sanctuary, and lastly, relationships with adults and peers in the program. Analysis of qualitative data highlights the importance of sanctuary—not limited to psychological safety, but with an emphasis on celebrating aspects of identity. Findings also point to important intersections between social justice work and sanctuary, with youth expressing a desire to impact change from protected and affirming spaces that are liberating and allow them to take risks.

1. Introduction

Youth organizing or activism programs[1] engage young people in events and campaigns to promote societal improvement (Braxton, Buford, & Marasigan, 2013). Youth organizing programs can be understood from the youth development tradition, as an enhancement of youth programming with the additions of critical consciousness development and community organizing activities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Kirshner, 2015). These programs may also be understood from a community organizing perspective, as an outgrowth of social justice campaigns, which have always involved crucial—though not always visible—contributions from young people (Delgado, 2015). Similarly, we may consider youth organizing programs in terms of (a) their impact on societal change and movement building or (b) their contribution to the development of the youth who participate. Some, but not all, research on youth organizing addresses these two important aims and perspectives (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Ginwright & James, 2002; Kirshner, 2009, 2015).

However, less is known regarding youths' motivation to attend youth activism programs—and the identity-related factors at play in their decisions to join programs with social justice aims. Motivation theory (particularly in education) and research on youth decisions to attend to other types of programs and activities can certainly provide direction. For example, youth motivation to attend youth development

programs has been studied from Self-Determination Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory perspectives (summarized below). Similarly, research about the reasons people volunteer in general—and in particular, youth motivations to participate in voluntary community service—may shed some light on youth motivation to attend and earnestly engage in social justice programs (also discussed below).

Aspects of youth activism programs make them unique in this context. Unlike service learning programs, for example, youth organizing programs are structured to support youth from communities that are marginalized in leadership roles and to involve youth in addressing injustices that affect them directly (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Youth in these programs are not volunteering to help others in need; they are engaging in social justice work for themselves and others, thus their motivations to attend may be different. Relatedly, youth with social identities that are marginalized may seek a space for safety and belonging—and youth activism programs may address this motivation.

In the present investigation, we juxtapose the motivation of joining programs in order to participate in community organizing around social justice with the motivation of seeking a protected space in which to experience safety and belonging. Understanding the reasons youth participate in youth organizing programs entails more than simple decisions about what to do after school; rather, it gets to the core of these programs, their purpose, and how they relate to youth identity and development, especially for traditionally marginalized young people.

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[1] We use the phrases youth organizing programs and youth activism programs interchangeably.

This is important to understand for early adolescence, when youth program attendance is higher, to late adolescence when issues of identity and transition from school are salient.

The current study investigates eight programs in a citywide youth organizing initiative that serve as affinity groups for youth facing social adversity based on their race, gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation. The programs provide education about the identity group's past (e.g. African-American history, women's history, LGBTQ + history) and about structural inequalities in the U.S. that demonize individuals from non-dominant groups and perpetuate racial, gender, and economic oppression. These programs encourage and support early, middle, and late adolescents (depending on the program) to create and join in social change activities in their neighborhoods and schools to work against systems that further marginalize them. Many also include more traditional youth development activities like recreation, arts, field trips, and career and college readiness content. Our aim is to understand the reasons youth choose to attend and engage in these programs—with a particular focus on attending in order to participate in social justice and the separate but related reason of attending in order to find a safe and affirming space, which we term sanctuary.

1.1. Youth activism programs

Structured programs for children and youth have seen tremendous growth over the past few decades, with participation nearly doubling in the last ten years (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Over more than a century of history, the purpose of out-of-school time (OST) programs has varied widely, with goals ranging from supervision, fun, and recreation, to spiritual and civic development, to academic remediation, enrichment, and support for positive youth development (Halpern, 2003). Although evidence of the effectiveness of OST programs is mixed (Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010), studies continually find that OST programs can contribute to positive development (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). Regular OST attendance has been associated with gains in academic achievement and a host of positive outcomes (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2009; Herrera, Grossman, & Linden, 2013; Lauver, 2002; Naftzger, Manzeske, Nistler, & Swanlund, 2013; Naftzger, Vinson, Liu, Zhu, & Foley, 2014). Research suggests that these programs are likely to aid positive youth development through skill building and strong relationships with adults (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011).

Youth organizing can foster positive and productive relationships between student organizers and adult organizers where youth are able to take on more adult roles than is typical in dominant, age-segregated settings like school. In a study of primarily middle and late adolescents (*M* age = 16.5), Sullivan and Larson (2009) found that youth organizing programs showed promise for youth learning about the adult world, including spheres of work and post-secondary education, skills for navigating these spheres, and access to traditionally adult spaces (i.e. meetings with professionals and civic leaders set up by adult program leaders) which youth may not have been exposed to before.

Researchers have found that authentic and deeply rooted adult-youth mentoring relationships can support the academic and social development of youth from marginalized groups and communities, like African American girls and young women (Gamble-Lomax, 2016). The small group settings of youth organizing programs may lead the way to mentorship-type relationships between adults and youth who participate in youth organizing programs at a high level over sustained periods of time. These relationships can be described as "natural" mentorships because they occur outside of a defined mentorship program, under conditions of more equal power (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). Furthermore, mentoring effects may be more pronounced in a social justice activism context where collaborative partnerships between youth and adults are formed. Liang, Spencer, West, and Rappaport (2013) posit that traditional mentoring programs focus too narrowly on the interpersonal relationship within the mentoring dyad

(or group) while many problems that disadvantaged or "at-risk" youth face are the result of injustice. Addressing underlying social ecologies and problems such as historical discrimination, housing conditions, and lack of political power may facilitate positive development. Where youth-adult partnerships are built within mentoring relationships, mentoring shifts "from a 'therapeutic' approach in which individual youth are the targets of the intervention to a more socially transformative approach wherein mentors and youth forge collaborative partnerships that promote positive youth development at individual and societal levels" (Liang et al., 2013, p. 259).

1.2. Understanding why youth attend programs

Some of the reasons that children or youth may attend OST programs are relatively apparent. Families may encourage or compel youth to spend time in these adult-supervised settings. The need for supervision is particularly relevant for younger children—and children who join a program at a young age may continue to participate through high school. However, research shows a positive linear trend between age and autonomy in decision-making about attending OST programs such that by high school, most youth attending OST programs report making decisions about attendance for themselves (rather than parents making those decisions; Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014). Adolescents, especially during the high school years, have an increased variety of options in the OST hours, e.g. employment, self-care, sports, OST programs, socializing with friends, etc. Accordingly, Denault and Poulin (2009) found that across grades 7–11, attendance in OST programs tends to steadily decline.

Motivation theories in education provide categorizations of the relevant factors that may drive youth attendance in youth organizing programs. For example, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that humans are driven to satisfy the needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, has been used more than any other theory in studies of youth program attendance (e.g., Berry & LaVelle, 2013). Applied to youth activism programs, youth may be drawn by the social support (relatedness), the opportunity to successfully experience political actions (competence), and a sense of control of their time and perhaps the direction a program takes (autonomy). Researchers have also used Expectancy-Value theory to explain youth program attendance; for example, in a study of how adolescents (age 14–21) become in engaged in art and leadership programs, Dawes and Larson's (2011) found that youth were more likely to become engaged when they found the program interesting (value) and thought they would be successful (expectancy). These broad theories provide useful frameworks, but more specific investigation is needed to understand the nuances of motivation in the particular context of youth activism programs.

A substantial scholarly literature explores the formation and life cycle of social movements, addressing a vast range of historical, sociological, and political factors. Whereas education-related motivation studies tend to consider personal and psychological processes for decision-making, the literature on social movement tends to look outside the individual to structural and societal factors. Summary of this literature is beyond the scope of this study, but several relevant findings are worth mentioning. Early theories suggested that social movements were caused in part by a group's discontent with access to things that others had, but this is not enough to fully explain activism (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Studies suggest that marginalized groups become mobilized when resources—including leaders, organizing skills, and a base constituency of interested individuals who may be mobilized for collective actions—come together (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 2002). Individuals are more likely to become activists in social movements when more opportunities for activism are open to them. Social movement organizations—including youth organizing programs—which create an institutional structure to social movements, increase the supply of opportunities for collective action (McCarthy & Zald, 2002). These perspectives suggest that structures supporting collective

activism for marginalized groups are more likely to develop as social conditions improve. That is, when oppressive social controls are loosened, strategic social activism for oppressed groups becomes less costly and more likely to succeed in achieving its goals (Jenkins, 1983). Thus, as society takes incremental steps toward equity, engaging in collective action becomes a more rational response to institutional oppression.

Youth organizing programs also share similarities with organized youth community service volunteering. Research on community service, which has similarities in approach to both motivation and social movement literatures, has found that decisions to volunteer are related to background and dispositional characteristics as well as the match between individual motivation and mission of the service organization. Positive relationships have been found between initiating volunteerism and education, income, parental involvement in volunteering and religious affiliation (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). Dispositional characteristics such as empathy and expectancy of success are also related to volunteering (Wilson, 2000). Previous studies have found that both initiation of and persistence in volunteering are connected to the importance a person places on an organization's mission, sense of belonging within the organization and feelings that their contribution matters in advancing the organization's goals (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Flanagan, 2013; Omoto, Snyder, & Hackett, 2010). This, of course, aligns with a SDT perspective on the importance of relatedness and competence. In a youth program context, Ramey, Lawford, and Rose-Krasnor (2017) found that youth-adult partnering and psychological engagement both predicted helping behaviors in the school and community (e.g., "visited or helped out people who were sick").

Importantly, youth activism differs from charitable community-service or volunteer activities. Volunteer programs are often designed to allow youth to play a part in addressing challenges facing *others* such as the homeless, infirmed, elderly, young children, or entities such as the environment. However, youth activism programs are designed to help youth develop a socio-political awareness or critical consciousness of social oppressions like poverty, racism, sexism, and homophobia, which *affect them directly*. Accordingly, motivations to attend youth organizing programs may be uniquely related to praxis or actions aimed at undoing the social ills that plague youths' own lives as well as the lives of others with whom they share identity traits (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Murray & Milner, 2015; Wagaman, 2016; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2002).

Research on reasons for attendance in youth programs often finds that from early to late adolescence, youth cite fun, content of activities, and relationships with peers and staff as the most important (Akiva & Horner, 2016; Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010; Loder & Hirsch, 2003). Some research shows that older adolescents and those attending programs designed for youth from marginalized groups, also referred to motivations related to safe haven, self-improvement and skills acquisition (See Akiva & Horner, 2016). In addition, research on features of effective developmental settings identifies many of the same features as studies of youth motivation to attend; notably, psychological safety, skill-building opportunities, adult-youth relationships, and opportunities for authentic leadership or participation (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2004; Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015).

Akiva and Horner's (2016) study focused on middle and late adolescents attending neighborhood-based programs that offered traditional youth development activities such as sports, homework assistance, arts, and career readiness activities. Youth indicated that program content was the most important motivator of attendance but that staff quality was inexorably tied to youths' valuing of content. The authors noted that "staff make the content good" (p. 289). The present study builds on that work by examining motivations for adolescents to attend youth organizing programs.

Unique aspects of youth organizing programs also pave the way for the introduction or growth of the developmental asset of critical consciousness (Ginwright & James, 2002; Kirshner, 2009) during the adolescent years when identity is salient and many civic views are believed to develop (Flanagan, 2013; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Joining, as they do, adolescents who share identity traits that trigger social discrimination (e.g. being a person of color, and/or female, and/or homosexual, and/or transgender), for the purpose of working toward social justice for their identity group, youth organizing programs may create an environment of heightened feelings of belonging, competence, connectedness, safety, mattering, and well-being in line with motivational theory and known OST effectiveness. These conditions are fertile for the growth of critical consciousness, "the process by which socially marginalized people critically analyze their social and economic conditions and take action to improve them" (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015, p. 848). Through the process of critical social analysis and collective identity empowerment, feelings of inferiority among oppressed people lessen and a vision of a more equal society becomes apparent (Freire, 1973). Youth activism programs support youth in developing a socio-political awareness or critical consciousness of broader social oppressions like poverty, racism, sexism, and homophobia to create praxis or actions aimed at undoing the social ills that plague their lives and the lives of others (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Murray & Milner, 2015; Wagaman, 2016; Watts et al., 2002).

The importance of supporting youths' critical consciousness development extends beyond the present-day issues they undertake, the impact on the local communities they serve, and even beyond the bounds of their immediate personal development. The impacts of critical consciousness can be felt in youths' future along the lines of developing more precise career aspirations and developing key facets of future civic engagement. Specifically, youth with increased levels of critical consciousness are more certain of their vocational and career paths (Diemer & Blustein, 2006) and feel more socio-political control, a factor predictive of increased likelihood of voting (Diemer & Li, 2011).

1.3. The present study

The present mixed-methods study investigates marginalized adolescents' motivation to attend programs designed to raise critical consciousness. In this research, we investigate eight OST programs that were part of a youth organizing initiative created by one foundation in the community. The initiative was designed to support the civic, social, and political development of adolescents, particularly teenagers from marginalized communities, through organizing/activism programming. The current study uses data drawn from a mixed-methods evaluation of the overall initiative. The evaluation focused on three domains: youth-adult partnerships and civic skill-building, institution and issue success, and youth motivation and identity development. The intention of the evaluation was to determine how youth and institutions develop in youth organizing programs, not the "effectiveness" of such programs for influencing youth outcomes, per se.

Our study examines how motivations related to personal relationships, sanctuary, and engaging in social justice work are related to each other and to characteristics of youth at early, middle, and late adolescence. Qualitative data from youth focus groups deepens our analysis of how different sources of motivation activate youth participants' interest in and valuing of program attendance. In short, we investigate the following question: How do the competing reasons of social justice, sanctuary, and personal relations affect youth decisions to attend youth activism programs and why?

2. Method

We used a mixed-methods approach to data collection with complementary and completeness aims. Quantitative analysis of survey results provides the basic sketch of attendance motivations across sites and individuals. Through qualitative analysis, we provide additional depth and elaborate on youth motivations for program attendance, drawing from youths' own voices. We began with quantitative analysis

to establish a basic understanding of motivations for participating, then used qualitative analyses to build upon and deepen that understanding—what Bryman (2006) referred to as *expansion*.

2.1. The youth organizing initiative in Pittsburgh

In the fall of 2012, The Heinz Endowments set out to develop a strong ecosystem of youth engagement opportunities in Pittsburgh. After an assessment of current efforts (Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing and Movement Strategy, 2012), the foundation discovered that the majority of their investments supported young people as clients, through youth service organizations, or as participants in traditional youth development or civic engagement programs. Few programs engaged youth, especially youth from traditionally marginalized communities, as leaders and decision-makers. The foundation did not desire to disinvest in these other types of youth opportunities, but instead moved to create an extended continuum of engagement programs for young people to develop, lead and engage as citizens.

The absence of youth voice was particularly conspicuous in the community's public education reform conversations. Considerable resources and efforts were focused on school reform, yet youth themselves were not part of those activities. Undergirded by a belief that those closest to a problem are often best suited to address it, or should at least be included in the process, the foundation developed a transformative youth organizing grants agenda. The goal of this agenda was to support young people as agents of change in efforts of educational justice. Organizing was not a strategy commonly supported at the foundation and continues to be a source of debate among funders who want to see social change, but themselves represent the power structure these organizations work to disrupt.

Initially, this agenda supported four community-based organizations, chosen through an open RFP process, to receive technical assistance and capacity-building training delivered by a nationally-recognized organization committed to movement building and systemic change. After a successful first year, four additional organizations were added into the cohort, this time via multiple program officers' selection and with an expanded set of goals to bridge internal foundation silos. Two of the four organizations focused on girl empowerment while the other two focused on the arts. As the second cohort began, foundation leadership asked for the program to be evaluated. This research was embedded in that multi-year evaluation project.

2.2. Sample

The survey sample consisted of N = 83 youth across eight programs, and focus groups (described below) were attended by a subset of this sample. We collected survey and focus group data in the fall and spring of the 2014/15 school year. Staff at program sites determined the timing of survey administrations. Some sites were receptive to data collection when first approached about it. At other sites, research staff had longer discussions and negotiations about how and when data collection would occur. Some sites allowed researchers to data collect data on multiple occasions. A handful of youth took the survey more than once; however, only data from their first survey were included in analysis. We administered surveys at program sites using Qualtrics software on iPads.

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the youth survey sample. Youth were early, middle and late adolescents, ranging in age from 11 to 19 with an average age of 15.2 years.[2] We did not directly obtain youth household income; however, youth reported their neighborhood of residence—for which household income data is available. Most youth lived in neighborhoods in which more than half of households earn 200% or less than the federal poverty level. Youth attendees of

Community Coalition and Nature Power lived in neighborhoods of particularly concentrated poverty. However, the survey participants from Girls in Government lived in relatively low poverty communities. Youth self-identified racially as follows: 51% Black or African American, 21% chose Multiracial identity or selected more than one race, 16% White or Caucasian, 2% American Indian, 2% Other and 1% Asian (6 cases were missing). In addition, in response to a separate question, 6% identified as Latino/a. All students who selected more than one race chose African American as one of their racial identities. For gender, 43% identified as male; 49% as female, and 7% as other (respondents further specified as agender, demigirl, gender fluid, queer, etc.; two cases were missing).

As shown in Table 1, age, race, and gender were unevenly dispersed across programs. Most served a range of high school students, but two programs (LiberatED and Nature Power) tended to serve early adolescents, including middle school age youth. Four programs (Empower Youth, LiberatED, Community Coalition and FixOurSchools) served predominantly African American youth, and all of these programs had a majority of male survey respondents. Two programs (Girls in Government and Fierce Voices) served exclusively female youth—one (Fierce Voices) completely Black or African American youth and one (Girls in Government) with a majority of White youth. The program specifically aimed at LGBTQ + interests (SpeakOut Theatre) served a majority of White youth, and slightly over half of these youth indicated their gender as other.

Duration of youth experience at their programs varied. At the time of the survey, about half of youth reported that they had been attending their program for 7 months or longer (51%). One third (33%) had been involved longer than a year, while 12% were new at their programs, having attended for one month or less.

2.3. Survey measures

Youth completed a 101-item questionnaire covering topics from leadership, civic participation, attendance motivations and opportunities for skill building. We developed our survey based on youth development research and in collaboration with the funders of the multisite initiative.

2.3.1. Why attend

The why attend items were adapted from scales used by Akiva and Horner (2016). Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each item in their reasons for attending the youth organizing program on a five-point scale (not at all important, not very important, pretty important, SUPER important). As described more completely in Scale Development Results, the items reflect three scales: social justice work, sanctuary, and people. The study presented in Akiva and Horner (2016) involved adolescents in urban neighborhood-based youth programs that did not have an explicit social justice focus like the programs in the current sample. Therefore, in collaboration with the funders for the initiative, we developed additional items to address this focus (see Table 2). In addition, the sanctuary items were developed in response to qualitative findings in Akiva and Horner (2016).

From surveys we collected the following demographic information.

2.3.2. Age

Youth reported age in years from a drop-down list of options.

2.3.3. Gender

Youth were given four options: male, female, trans*,[3] or other, with an open fill-in box for other.

Table 1
Neighborhood poverty, race and gender percentages across eight programs.

Pseudonym	Survey									Focus group
	n	Age (Mean)	Neighborhood Poverty[a]	Race[b]			Gender			n
				Black	White	Multiracial	Male	Female	Other	
Empower Youth[c]	10	15.2	55.5	50	0	10	60	40		6
LiberatED	10	14.2	45.7	80	0	20	80	20		6
Community Coalition	12	15.7	69.6	67	0	25	58	42		11
FixOurSchools	13	15.7	51.9	62	8	23	58	42		3
SpeakOut Theatre	11	17.4	42.3	0	64	18	18	27	55	6
Girls in Government	5	16.6	18.1	20	60	0	0	100		5
Nature Power	17	12.5	63.2	47	12	29	31	69		4
Fierce Voices	5	16.8	41.8	80	0	20	0	100		–

[a] Percentage of households in the youth's neighborhood with income at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.

[b] Note: Black or African American, White or Caucasian and Multiracial are presented for race as they are far more prevalent than any other responses.

[c] In Empower Youth, one youth chose "other" and three did not provide their race.

2.3.4. Race

The survey asked youth how they identified racially with a list of the seven census categories (White, Black/African American, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, Multiracial, Other), from which they could chose all that apply. A separate question asked whether they identified as Latino/a.

2.3.5. Neighborhood poverty

In order to avoid potential stigma associated with asking youth about their household income (or free lunch status), we asked youth to write in the neighborhood in which they lived, within the city of Pittsburgh or its suburbs. We drew data from the American Community Survey to determine neighborhood-level poverty using the proportion of households earning < 200% of the federal poverty level for household size in each neighborhood. Twenty-eight youth identified one of three commonly referred to areas of the city that do not directly correspond with a neighborhood defined by the census. For example, the "North Side" of Pittsburgh includes > 15 census neighborhoods. In these cases, we used a population-weighted average of poverty across the given area's neighborhoods.

2.4. Focus group procedures

A subset of youth who completed surveys participated in focus group interviews about their experiences in youth organizing. We held focus groups during times that were convenient to programs, and we worked with adult leaders to select youth to participate. We asked adult leaders to identify a representative subset of youth at each site. In smaller programs, and one larger one (Community Coalition), all youth present at the time of the focus group participated. In other programs youth volunteered to participate, while in others, adult leaders selected youth to participate based the duration of their time in their program, which they felt indicated familiarity with the work of the site and ability to speak comprehensively on their experience. Youth participated in focus groups after they completed the survey. It is possible that completing the surveys primed youth to pay particular attention to our three categories of reasons for attendance in response to our open-ended focus group questions. However, because the goal of the focus groups was to learn more about these motivations, the impact of this priming was likely not detrimental to our findings.

As noted in the literature, maintaining consistent attendance is a challenge for youth development programs, particular in the adolescent years (Denault & Poulin, 2009). We observed great variation in attendance at these programs, and our focus groups varied in size correspondingly. We held focus groups with between three and six youth (and in one case 11 youth) in conference rooms or classrooms at the various youth organizing sites. They lasted for approximately 1 h. Adult

researchers from our team conducted the focus groups, utilizing a mostly-structured interview protocol.

As described earlier, during development of the survey, initiative and program leaders suggested several items related to youth investment in social justice causes and the program as a place for staying out of trouble. We did not specifically include these constructs in focus group interviews but asked more general questions like "why do you come?", "why did you first attend?", and "what issues do you consider when deciding to attend?" We also probed youth to "tell us about your adult leaders." In addition, we asked youth to share their perspectives on a variety of program specific topics. Adult leaders were allowed to sit in, but were asked to step out when youth were asked about their perspectives on their adult leaders. We audio recorded focus groups on a tablet computer and later transcribed them.

We analyzed transcriptions using Dedoose software (Dedoose Version 7.5.9, 2016). The purpose of these analyses was to expand upon the quantitative results (cf., Bryman, 2006) to gain more nuanced perspectives that might have been missed in the survey responses. To create a code manual, one researcher analyzed each site transcript one-at-a-time, through an inductive process of reading through the transcripts that captured the general ideas of what was discussed in the focus group. For instance, in response to the broad question "why do you come?", we coded individual responses with "reasons youth attend." However, evidence of youth motivations for attending also emerged from responses to other questions and discussions during the focus group. After the initial round of coding, we created a revised manual that encompassed all initial inductive codes and eventually contained additional codes, developed through exploring the data for revised and more precise concepts. For instance, "relationships with adults" was delineated from "perspectives on adults," as these were two distinct concepts. Separately, another researcher used this revised code manual to code a transcript, and after it was determined that she was coding at 85% reliability, she continued to go through the remaining transcripts to ensure accuracy. Finally, the code developer on our team conducted a final round of coding to ensure saturation. Excerpts of text with high code frequency counts were grouped into themes, further analyzed for sub-themes, and described in relation to quantitative findings.

3. Results

3.1. Scale development

We conducted factor analysis on the "why attend" items, in particular, to understand how the new items worked. As we expected these factors to correlate, we used Oblimin rotation; though we found the same pattern with Varimax rotation. The scree plot suggested that three

Table 2

Factor loadings for why attend items.

Item	The work	People	Sanctuary
Because the work is important to me	0.76		
Because I care about the work	0.72		
Because I want to help the community[a]	0.46		0.45
Because of the staff members		0.81	
Because there are other youth here I want to hang out with		0.76	
Because of one particular staff member here		0.73	
Because of the adults here		0.71	
Because my friends want me to come		0.63	
Because I like the other youth here		0.59	
Because it helps me be a better person			0.80
Because when I'm here, I'm protected from bad things that go on outside			0.77
Because it gives me somewhere to go to stay away from negative stuff			0.77
Because it helps me stay on a good path			0.69
Because it's a safe place to be			0.63

Note: the extraction method was Principal Components Analysis. Loadings for Oblimin rotation presented. Loadings lower than 0.30 not shown.

[a] As shown, the loadings for this item were even for the work and the sanctuary factors. However, in the PCA with Varimax rotation this item clearly loaded with the work (0.58 vs 0.46 for sanctuary).

factors was preferred and explained 63% of the variance. This factor analysis led to three scales: people (6 items; a = 0.81), sanctuary (5 items; a = 0.80), and work (3 items; a = 0.79). Note that our finding that the staff and peer items loaded in a single factor was different than that found by Akiva and Horner (2016). However, when we forced four factors, the adult and staff items did not separate cleanly. This suggests that in this particular sample, youth who rated their relationships with adults highly also tended to rate their relationships with peers highly (and vice versa), and this may be reflective of the difference in samples between the Akiva and Horner (2016) study and the present study.

3.2. Analyses of reasons for attending

Table 3 provides descriptive information and bivariate correlations for the variables used in analyses. The people and sanctuary subscales were relatively normally distributed. The work subscale was substantially negatively skewed; driven by 35% of the sample choosing 5 (SUPER important). Comparing across the three reasons for attending, youth rated the work highest, followed by sanctuary, then people. These differences were all statistically significant using paired-samples *t*-tests (people to sanctuary: $t = 5.29$, $p < 0.001$; sanctuary to work: $t = 4.60$, $p < 0.001$, work to people: $t = 9.33$, $p < 0.001$). Simply put, when asked directly, the most highly rated reason youth gave for attending was the importance of the work of social justice.

The right side of Table 3 shows correlations among the three reasons for attending and demographic measures. The three reasons for attending correlate with each other at moderate levels. We also see a negative correlation between sanctuary and neighborhood poverty, suggesting the counterintuitive finding that youth in higher poverty

neighborhoods may tend to value sanctuary *less* than youth from lower poverty neighborhoods. We also see a positive correlation between people and age such that older youth tend to report people as an important reason for attending more so than younger youth. Of particular note, we found no correlation between age and sanctuary or between age and the work. When we examined this further (e.g., creating bar charts, combining ages into two-year ranges) we see no patterns for age related to these two variables.

Using a one-way ANOVA, we tested for site differences in the reasons for attending measures and found that both sanctuary and the work differed significantly across sites ($F = 4.23$, $p < 0.001$ and $F = 4.01$, $p < 0.001$ respectively). Results for the people scale were non-significant, suggesting that this reason did not differ between sites.

To understand the work and sanctuary motivations further, in an exploratory fashion we created the scatterplot shown in Fig. 1. Work is plotted on the y-axis such that higher up the figure indicates higher ratings for this scale. Sanctuary is plotted on the x-axis such that the further to the right indicates higher endorsement. By far the majority of cases appear in Quadrant B (78% of the sample), where youth rated both sanctuary and the work as pretty important or SUPER important. This suggests that most youth report that they attend both for sanctuary and the social justice work. In contrast, the two quadrants low in the work have few cases—Quadrant C (5 cases, 6%) and D (3 cases, 4%). Quadrant A contains respondents who ranked the work as important and sanctuary as less important and it includes 10 youth (12%). This suggests that there are very few youth who report coming for sanctuary (and not the work) but a nontrivial amount who come for the work and do not consider sanctuary to be an important component.

We computed mean age and neighborhood poverty for each

Table 3

Descriptive statistics and correlations for continuous variables.

Measures	Items	Range	*M*	SD	Skew	Kurt	α	Bivariate correlations			
								Work	Sanct	People	Age
Work	3	− 2–2	1.30	0.75	− 1.18	1.09	0.79	–			
Sanctuary	5	− 2–2	0.89	0.74	− 0.45	− 0.28	0.80	0.48***	–		
People	6	− 2–2	0.34	0.86	− 0.63	0.23	0.81	0.32**	0.41***	–	
Age	1	12–19	15.17	2.07	− 0.13	− 1.20	–	0.21	0.21	0.34**	–
Neigh. poverty	1	0.11–0.88	0.54	0.19	− 0.39	− 0.70	–	− 0.22	− 0.31**	− 0.18	− 0.25*

Note: range is possible responses not actual responses. No significant differences (ANOVA) for work, sanctuary, or people by gender or race.
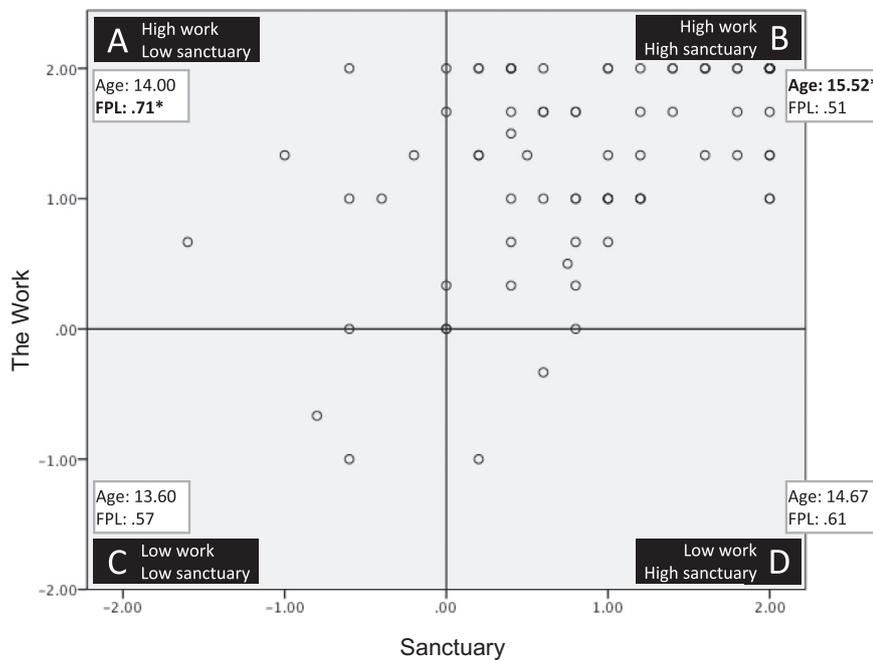
**p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

quadrant (treating scores of 3 as low), and both show significant differences across quadrants. Gender, race, and program show no differences across quadrants and do not appear in the figure. These calculations yielded two findings. First, youth in Quadrant B (high, high) are on average, a year or more *older* than youth in the other quadrants (F[3, 76] = 2.86, p = 0.04; contrast of quadrant B age vs other three quadrants t[76] = 2.43, p = 0.02); that is, youth in the sample that rate both sanctuary and the work as important tend to be older. Second, youth in Quadrant A (high work, low sanctuary) on average tend to come from neighborhoods with significantly higher poverty rates than youth in other quadrants. This suggests that youth in high poverty neighborhoods may engage in youth organizing programs more for the activism work and less for the sanctuary they may provide.

3.3. Qualitative analysis

Focus groups provided youth with numerous opportunities to discuss their reasons for attending—and, in many cases, the reasons underlying the reasons they initially stated. These exploratory discussions worked to complement survey results as well as provide depth and nuance beyond what was indicated in the survey items. The reasons for attending that youth rated most highly in surveys were also the ones they discussed most frequently in focus groups. Participants described coming for *the work* of youth-led social change, and participants described—in various ways—what we couch in the term *sanctuary*; i.e., spaces where students felt safe and supported. In addition, through qualitative analysis it became clear that the ideas of the work and sanctuary were integrally connected for many youth. In the following section we discuss these three themes.

3.3.1. Attending for social justice work
Aligning with results from the quantitative analysis, many youth participants expressed being motivated to attend their youth organizing sites primarily for the work of the youth organizing site; i.e., the intended campaign of each program. When asked to delve deeper, several offered candid responses that reveal deep self-reflection related to the projects undertaken. Specifically, youth gave three reasons for being drawn to *the work*: their interest in the causes or topics undertaken, their desire to impact change, and their desire to help themselves and their community.

3.3.1.1. Interest in the topic/cause. First, participants reported attending because of their general interest in the causes, topics, subjects discussed or work entailed in various projects. For instance, in Speak Out Theatre, participants created and enacted a major theatrical event and in their focus group, they discussed their motivation relative to this play. One youth at Speak Out Theatre described the importance of choosing the topic of the play: "Usually the topic is what makes me do it because if it's a topic that I feel like needs help or needs to make – like have a change in there…usually I want to learn more about it, too." Participants believed that the topic or the issue of concern is what drew them to attend and remain engaged in Speak Out.

In addition, participants elaborated on connection between their interests and their motivation to put forth effort. Another youth from Speak Out Theatre stated, "I think what motivates me…is the topic definitely because I feel like if you're not enjoying something that you're organizing or attending, you're not going to put your full effort into it." Underlying their interest was the belief that if they did not find interest in the work, it would have been difficult to engage fully in the work.

3.3.1.2. Desire to impact change. Closely connected to participants' interest in the topic or focus of the work was their interest in engaging themselves in something that made "an impact on people." This was evident in nearly all youth responses. The importance of this reason for attendance is particularly pronounced in comparison to other possible reasons for attendance. In their focus group, youth from Empower Youth were asked to consider their motivation to attend the program, given that they receive compensation to be there.[4] Although neither the survey nor the focus group protocol specifically asked how payment motivated attendance, students at this site and at SpeakOut Theatre—the only sites where students were paid for attendance—discussed issues related to payment during focus groups.

In weighing the compensation with the work, one youth said, "Well, the money was a plus. But like, it was equal for real—I got money and I got to do this, like making an impact." Other youth expressed similar

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[4] Two of the eight groups provided financial incentive to youth for program attendance and participation. Program leaders and youth participants viewed pay in two ways—as a message that students' work is valued and as an incentive for consistent and on-time attendance. Some students contributed portions of their stipends to their families; others used the fact that they were paid as an argument to convince their parents to allow them to participate.

sentiments. Participants noted being interested in not only the topic taken up by the program, but also in the possibility that they could make an impact for a cause of concern on a grander scale. In some regards, participating in a youth organizing site indicated that they were contributing to and making a difference in society among a group of like-minded youth. Youth at many sites also reported having part-time jobs outside of the program, so attending for the sole purpose of earning money was not necessary. Earning money was an additional benefit, but it was not the most important factor driving participants to attend.

3.3.1.3. Desire to help others and themselves. Lastly, participants were drawn to the work because of their interest in both helping others and bettering their community. In Community Coalition, participants framed their motivations and their interests in "helping others." One youth shared a critical idea noting, "I want to better our community." A key word in this quote, is "our." Some of the programs, and particularly the one discussed in this quote, focus on helping predominantly African American communities with economic, environmental, and educational justice. Youth viewed themselves as potentially active members in these communities, which reflects a high level of civic engagement. In this way, participants desired to help their community, displayed high levels of civic concern and engagement and, by proxy, desired to help themselves as well.

Another aspect of helping others and themselves was that across sites, youth described learning the associated "language" of social justice in their different domains. In this regard, youth organizing was centered on teaching youth the tools for self and in-group survival against the policies and practices adopted by those that continue to marginalize their own in-group members across lines of gender, race, and sexuality.

3.3.2. Attending for sanctuary

In addition to being drawn to their youth organizing sites for the social justice work, many youth also discussed their decisions to attend as influenced by the affirming and protected nature of their youth organizing sites. Overall, youth referred to their sites using various allusions that conveyed both the deep attachment and symbolism. For instance, in Speak Out Theatre, one participant referenced it as, "like a Mecca, a utopia where you can learn…" As this youth describes their placement similar to a site of sacred pilgrimage or as a perfect place, where youth felt safe, wanted, and could be at ease. Youth saw their sites as learning environments and framed them as places free of the types of strife encountered in other learning contexts. Participants summoned this utopic and seeming religiosity when they discussed their placements and couched it in a consistent notion of sanctuary as *safe.* Youth also felt that their places were safe spaces that affirmed their identities and protected them from physical and psychological negativity or even violence. Thus, a deeper analysis revealed that when participants discussed issues of safety they framed it in two particular yet overlapping ways – sites as *affirming* space and sites as *protected* space.

Youth descriptions of sanctuary often went a step beyond what is commonly referred to as psychological safety, which is defined as feeling comfortable enough to take interpersonal risks (Wanless, 2016); that is, a state in which people feel confident to express their views or make mistakes. A protected space may be considered psychologically safe, and this may be an important component of sanctuary. However, an affirming space does not simply lack physical or psychological danger. Rather, youth were often quick to note that aspects of their identity are celebrated (not just tolerated) in these spaces.

3.3.2.1. Affirming space. Youth noted the ways that individuals within their sites created an affirming atmosphere where they could be more fully expressive of themselves in ways that may be silenced or marginalized in more structured environments like school. Youth in

Speak Out Theatre particularly discussed the importance of their site as affirming by highlighting the ways their peers and adults validated their personhood. In addition, participants found that their ideas, work, and contributions to projects like creating scripts for theatre were validated in their site: "Being in this space, it just – it helps me know who I am, and everyone respects that and we write our own scripts and that's nothing that I would do at my school." Youth noted the importance of feeling respected and engaging in activities that highlighted their voice. Peers and adults alike contributed to a culture at Speak Out Theatre, for instance, where listening and understanding were expected, attributes not always available at other institutions like their school.

> We have attentive listeners and perfect speakers but I think the thing that we – I think because sometimes we take for granted at [Speak Out Theatre], is it's such a safe space that if you take down the road you're not going to find….

Youth also considered psychological safety and personal affirmation through the lens of feeling they could stand up for their beliefs without feeling judged. In Girls in Government, for instance, participants discussed the ability to take the risk of stating their beliefs within a climate of acceptance. One participant noted that she was compelled to attend as it allowed for "standing up for what you believe in; that to think you can say something and not get judged harshly or at all basically." In FixOurSchools, a participant noted that their program created a space where, "You actually can express yourself and feelings about stuff and you don't get criticized about it."

In sum, youth were motivated to attend in part due to the affirming nature of their sites. Youth felt affirmed and safe to be their full selves without the negative gaze or risk of retribution from others who may further marginalize them.

3.3.2.2. Protected space. Participants came to their youth organizing sites from various home and community environments. Some participants noted that not only were their sites affirming of their ideas and their voices, they were also protected spaces that shield them from boredom or even possible harmful dealings on "the streets." In this regard, sites served as critical, protected space for youth. One participant at the FixOurSchools noted, "it's better for me than just playing around on the streets…" Youth preferred to spend time and energy at sites over other available activities in their neighborhoods.

In another way, participants at Empower Youth, an organization created for youth with incarcerated loved ones, described the positive work at their site in comparison to the negativity in other arenas of their lives. One participant noted, "it's also because of stuff like, you could come here instead of getting into negative things outside of here." Participants made an intentional choice to invest their out-of-school energy into positive projects instead of allowing themselves to be enveloped into negative things in their neighborhoods. Another participant at this same program noted that their program urged them toward "a positive instead of maybe going somewhere negative." This participant implied that, even though they may not intentionally seek out negative encounters, engaging in something more positive like the activities offered through youth organizing would keep them from slipping into unproductive endeavors.

3.3.3. The intersection of social justice work and sanctuary

Youth focus group responses point to the overlap and intersection of social justice work and sanctuary as motivating factors. The youth organizing groups in our sample were made up of members who shared aspects of identity; in particular race, gender, and/or sexual orientation. As noted, these sites provided sanctuary for youth marginalized, at least in part, for aspects of their identities. However, the sanctuary and the work overlapped in one critical area: the main organizing project for most of these groups was the uplifting or the betterment of those marginalized for their race, gender, and sexual orientation. For

instance, one site focused on stimulating civic agency for girls, another on improving the educational experiences of African American youth, and another centered on LGBTQ + youth amplifying their voices and perspectives. In this way, identity group membership, in many cases, unified sanctuary and social justice work motivations.

We saw examples of this in the ways youth describe their reasons for attending. In LiberatED one participant noted,

> [I] feel like I have a place to like be so I can speak my mind, and I did youth organizing because I feel like nobody really could hear us. Like we need to have a reason for our voices to be heard.

This response points to the overlap between being drawn to a safe and affirming space to be "heard" (i.e., sanctuary) and wanting to being heard for advancing a cause. The youth specifically describes wanting a "reason" for being heard, which in this case is the racial uplift and community reclamation enacted at LiberatED. Also, key in this example is the participants' importance of LiberatED as a place where not just their individual voice was heard, but also a place where a collective "us" could be heard, affirmed and validated. This youth's usage of "us" reflects the shared identity of youth organizing group members (i.e. African American shared racial group membership). Speaking their minds and allowing for their experiences to be heard amid a climate of personal affirmation was a key draw for participants, but it overlapped with the desire to help themselves and their marginalized in-group community members through social activism.

As noted, a key facet of all of these youth-led social change programs was their outreach and activism to the community. However, and beyond the example at LiberatED, many of the sites were made up of marginalized youth that reflected the identity of focus. For example, the group that focused on LGBTQ + awareness raising was made up almost entirely of LGBTQ + youth. Even Empower Youth, an organization for students with incarcerated loved ones, is tied to racial identity politics, because mass incarceration disproportionately impacts the lives of low-income families of color (see Wagner & Rabuy, 2016). So, even though this particular program did not intentionally address racial politics in its outreach to youth participants, it was still rooted in a civil rights issue that significantly impacts families of color, and their youth participants are nearly all African American. In this regard, outreach to the community was in many ways, outreach to self.

4. Discussion

The findings of this research suggest that for youth in social activism programs, the idea of sanctuary—a space that protected and affirmed their social identities—drove their attendance nearly as much as the desire to engage in social justice work. The more commonly studied people factors (i.e., attending a program to be with peers or supportive adults) motivated attendance to a lesser extent and did not vary across programs. The motivations of attending for sanctuary and social justice work were intertwined in important ways, suggesting a complexity and depth in youths' reasons for attending. A large majority of youth in our sample (78%) rated both social justice work and sanctuary as important reasons they attend. And in focus group discussions, youth indicated that sanctuary was perhaps deeper and more intertwined with social action than generally assumed. Youth did not simply describe sanctuary as psychological safety, defined in the literature as feeling able to take interpersonal risks (Wanless, 2016), but rather they described having aspects of their personal identities (e.g., African American, LGBTQ, female) protected and celebrated. As noted in other research (e.g., Kirshner, 2009), youth pointed to the ways their collective impact as part of a youth organizing group—the "us" aspect of their work—motivated their attendance. They felt both part of a space where they could be respected and affirmed, as well as the strength of collective engagement.

It was rare that youth attended their youth organizing program only for social justice work or only for sanctuary. The relatively high correlation between the social justice work and sanctuary measures (r = 0.48) suggest the relatedness of these two concepts for youth, and especially older youth (as evidenced in our analysis of quadrants). The focus group data further indicated the complexly intertwined nature of social justice and sanctuary. In particular, we saw the ways that the social identity groups each program focused on allowed youth to both feel safe and express their commitment to social justice. Youth expressed a desire to impact change and help themselves and their communities through participation in youth organizing programs, while finding sites as affirming spaces that allowed them to take risks and engage in the work of social justice activism. Their words provided clear illustrations of the overlap between sanctuary and the work found in our quantitative quadrant analysis. Protecting self was an integral aspect of youth organizing for many, as youth spent considerable amounts time learning about the issues plaguing their own communities, learning to agitate, and learning to organize themselves around campaigns that advocated for their own identity group.

Age had some, though not strong, effects on our findings. Early, mid, and late adolescents did not differ in their ratings of the importance of sanctuary or social justice work as reasons they attend. However, our exploratory analysis did suggest that youth in the quadrant that rated both sanctuary and social justice work highly tended to be older than the youth in other quadrants. It is possible that as adolescents grow in age and maturity, they increasingly see the value of these two key features. Similarly, we found that older youth were more likely to report people as important drivers of participation than their younger counterparts. As our factor analysis led to a "people" measure that combined adult-youth and peer relationships, it is difficult to interpret this age correlation. Perhaps as youth mature through adolescence, they increasingly value the social climate because they have more settings and other social climates to compare to from their additional years of experience. Another possibility is that youth-adult relationships deepened over time. In our informal interactions with adult program leaders, many noted that they are part of youth's social communities and may have experienced similar things when they were younger—such connections may have had more of an impact on later adolescents. In addition, youth from high poverty areas were more likely to report attendance in youth organizing programs for the work than the associated sanctuary. We are uncertain of youths' motivations for these responses. It may be that the youth from high poverty areas saw a more pressing need to address particular social ills than their counterparts from lower poverty areas thus making the work matter more.

Based on existing literature, the factors we found that motivate attendance in youth organizing programs may also serve as important strategies for effective youth development programming. The "protected space" aspect of sanctuary connects closely to physical and psychological safety, identified as one of eight features that maximize positive development in the foundational National Research Council (NRC) report on community programs for youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), The idea of "affirming space" connects to the NRC feature of opportunities to belong (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), and to related ideas which appear in some form in nearly all youth program assessment measures (e.g., welcoming & inclusive environment; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). Engaging in social justice work in youth programs connects to the skill building opportunities, community connections and opportunities that Eccles and Gootman (2002) and others have found to be critical to programmatic effectiveness.

It is possible that social justice work as a motivation is related to the psychological concept of youth purpose. Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) define purpose as the intention to accomplish something "that is meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (p. 121). They argue that purpose may be an important underlying motivation or high-level objective that guides many adolescents' decision-making and note that purpose involves not only personal search for meaning, but also "the desire to make a difference in the world" (p.

121). Future studies could explore the potential influence of purpose on the motivations for participating in youth activism programs.

4.1. Limitations

The limitations of this study relate to research design, measures, and the processes of conducting applied research. Although our mixed-methods approach yielded multiple perspectives, the data are cross-sectional, which limits our ability to consider change over time. The eight youth programs investigated are from a single city, and it is possible that our findings have limited generalization beyond that city, though nothing in our data suggests this. In addition, our measure for neighborhood poverty, although not a main variable in our inquiry, is a relatively weak proxy for household income. The average household income in a census defined neighborhood reflects only the most typical households in that region and individual households may earn substantially more or less than the typical household. A larger concern is that our qualitative data involved mostly one-time focus groups. Although members of our research team visited programs as participant observers multiple times before conducting focus groups, the conversations likely did not yield the depth we might have seen if we had the opportunity to engage in multiple focus groups over time. Additional focus groups or individual interviews might have yielded additional findings that we did not uncover in one round of focus groups per site.

Our sample was made up of program sites within a Foundation-driven funding initiative. As such, nearly all youth organizing programs (operated by youth-serving organizations or adult political organizing groups) have only been operating for a few years and were developed alongside or a few years before this initiative. Potential limitations could exist based on program similarities associated with this process and the newness of these programs. The recruitment for and makeup of the youth focus groups were uneven, which may be considered limitations. For inclusion in the focus groups, we asked adult leaders to identify youth based on their familiarity with the program and their representation of a sample of the types of perspectives encompassed by youth. As such, selection processes varied by site; some adult leaders selected youth whereas others asked for volunteers. In addition, the number of youth in each focus group varied, reflecting the varying attendance numbers at youth organizing program sessions. Although these processes led to differences across focus groups, they also reflected an organic process of engaging in youth development research in ways that resist interrupting the work of these programs, which may have strengthened the accuracy of our findings.

4.2. Implications and future directions

Given ongoing political unrest, exacerbated inequalities, and the growth of out-of-school time programs for young people (Afterschool Alliance, 2014), youth organizing and social justice-based programs for adolescents in the U.S. are likely to continue to grow in number and focus. As such, understanding youth motivations for attending and their experiences of programs is increasingly important. The present research yields practical considerations for current and future programs.

For youth program leaders, our results suggest that when designing and operating social justice youth programs, one should consider the importance of sanctuary alongside the opportunity to engage in activism work. We found that social justice work and sanctuary go hand in hand and may be mutually reinforcing. The protected and affirming space of youth organizing programs is likely a key factor in youth engagement and the effectiveness of their social justice campaigns. Further, sanctuary may be an important factor that supports youth to develop critical consciousness. Similarly, a youth program's social justice work may stimulate the conditions of sanctuary. Students who are critical of their environments outside the program might be drawn to affirming spaces to support and grow the work they do with similarly engaged peers and adult mentors. All of these findings suggest that a program can and probably should strive to include both sanctuary and opportunities to engage in social action.

Our findings also have particular implications youth recruitment. Our research design did not tease out whether one motivation precedes the other, but our findings suggest that they are likely intertwined. That is, youth may come first to engage in social action but keep attending, at least in part, for the feelings of sanctuary they experience. For example, an African American adolescent starting to become aware of racial injustice (cf., Phinney, 1993) may seek out a program in which to carry out related social action and also find a space that celebrates Black identity in a safe space. Or youth may initially come for sanctuary—seeking the comfort of a protected and affirming space, and then become engaged in the social justice aspects of a program. For example, a youth questioning his or her sexuality may seek out an LGBTQ + program space that allows her to explore in a protected and affirming space, and also engage in activism on behalf of the community.

Though not explicitly taken up in this study, and given that youth have a certain degree of agency over the programs they attend and the ways they participate (Akiva et al., 2014), parents play an important role in both youths' view of the world—and indeed their critical consciousness—as well as selection and support of programming and attendance (Collins & Laursen, 2004). That is, even if youth make seemingly independent decisions to attend youth organizing programs, their decision-making is shaped by their earlier experiences and often the views of their families. Similarly, parents or caregivers might encourage youth to participate in programs for pragmatic reasons, such as proximity, availability, or need for "childcare" coverage for younger youth. This leads us to deeper motivational questions. Youth perhaps were drawn to the social justice work because of their desires—perhaps in some cases tied to their families' desires for them—to learn to be in the world as a person from a marginalized race, gender, sexual orientation, or any intersection of these. Future directions for research might include a study into parental motivations for enrolling youth or encouraging youth to attend programs like these. With so much overlap between the types of work done in these programs and the types of youth (the racial, gender, and sexual identities) the program attract, families may be interested in finding places for their youth to learn to fight for themselves in a protected environment.

Based on the depiction of youth organizing programs in our findings, these programs appear to have the potential to provide positive opportunities for engaging and developmentally beneficial experiences. It also appears, from this work and others, that youth activism programs can offer important benefits that traditional youth development or service-learning programs often do not (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). However, as with much research on youth programs, we may be presenting an overly optimistic vision of what youth organizing programs can be. In reality, programs in our sample struggle with funding, high staff turnover, and uneven youth attendance (Quinn, 2012). Even if adequately resourced, youth organizing programs must compete for attention with high school sports, youth employment, and other activities that adolescents participate in. Engaging in social action will not likely ever appeal to all youth, especially as the out-of-school program options continue to grow in size and scope. However, many that do attend are drawn to the combination of sanctuary and the opportunity to work for social justice.

In a discussion of the collective focus of youth organizing, Kirshner (2009) noted, "Organizing represents a shift in focus from individual to group—from 'what I can do' to 'what we can do together'" (p. 416). Our findings suggest that this powerful statement is not only about the increased political power afforded by working for social justice together versus alone. The interpersonal aspects of collective action also make a difference to adolescent development. Youth development practitioners, advocates, and researchers then must harness and build off these complementary, not conflicting, motivational aspects, mindful of the promise sites have to positively alter the lives of young people and help them shape their social world.

Acknowledgement

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