



Youth-Led Participatory Action Research: Overview and Potential for Enhancing Adolescent Development

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ABSTRACT—*In this article, I review youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) as an innovative equity-focused approach to promote adolescent health and well-being. YPAR draws on the expertise of adolescents as they conduct research and improve conditions that support healthy development. Specifically, I explain the core principles and processes of YPAR, provide examples, discuss theoretical and empirical support for the effects of YPAR at many levels, and identify areas for research.*

KEYWORDS—*youth-led participatory action research; YPAR; youth development; empowerment*

Adolescence is a critical time for establishing habits and trajectories for health across the adult life course as well as for transitioning into adult roles in family, work, and civic domains. It can be a challenging phase to navigate, with high mortality from accidents, violence, and other behavioral causes. In the United States, adolescents of color and those living in poverty confront major health and educational inequalities. Nearly 50% of Native American, 40% of African American, and 35% of Hispanic youth live in poverty, compared to 13% of European American

youth (1). High school graduation rates of African Americans and Hispanics are substantially lower than those of European Americans, and the homicide rate for 15- to 19-year-olds is five times greater for African Americans than for European Americans.

Recently, reports by *The Lancet*, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization (2) have brought attention to the need for innovative approaches to promote the healthy development of adolescents, with deeper consideration for and practice of approaches for youth engagement, equity, and empowerment in adolescent health and development in the United States and globally. For example, the *Lancet* Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing (2), an international collaboration charged with establishing an agenda for research and policy focused on adolescence, has six foci:

- Considering adolescence within the life course.
- Promoting health equity and justice for youth.
- Increasing global visibility, monitoring, and accountability related to youth.
- Strengthening protective environments for youth.
- Scaling up sustainable and effective actions among young people.
- Engaging and empowering youth.

While promoting a sense of agency and empowerment is developmentally salient for adolescents generally, it is crucial for youth who must negotiate structural barriers such as poverty, racism, and heterosexism in their journey toward positive development and identity (3). From the standpoint of theories of sociopolitical development and empowerment (4, 5), positive development in the context of injustice involves young people analyzing the systemic factors that contribute to inequalities, as well as taking action to help address these factors.

In this review, I focus on youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) as an innovative, equity-focused approach for promoting adolescent health and well-being that draws on the expertise of adolescents as they conduct research and improve conditions that support healthy development. I describe the core

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principles and processes of YPAR, provide examples, discuss theoretical and empirical support for the effects of YPAR, and identify areas for research.

WHAT IS YPAR?

Youth-led participatory action research is a form of community-based participatory research in which youth are trained to identify and analyze problems relevant to their lives. In YPAR, youth also conduct research (e.g., surveys, focus groups, photovoice—photo documentation and interpretation of the phenomena under study) and advocate for changes based on evidence (6, 7). Among youth, YPAR is intended to promote a systemic, ecological view of a problem and skills in research inquiry, weighing evidence, communication, teamwork, and advocacy. Although more commonly used by youth conducting research to improve community and school conditions that affect their development and well-being, YPAR is also used to evaluate or adapt health programs and services for adolescents. YPAR research and practice have grown substantially, with more than 300 citations listed in a PsycINFO search for the term.

YPAR typically starts with young people identifying a problem or question they want to address and then cycling through research and action processes with the guidance of adult facilitators. (For curricular resources and case examples from projects in the United States and other countries, see yparhub.berkeley.edu.) To set the stage for YPAR, it is important to develop trust and communication among youth researchers and with adult facilitators, and to share power between adults and youth (8). After selecting a topic, young researchers choose their research design and methods with training to consider the relative strengths and limits of different methods (e.g., surveys or interviews), and to learn how data (e.g., numbers, images, maps, or text) help answer different facets of the research question and which data sources and measurement tools are useful. Youth researchers may decide to use existing data and generate new data from their school or community. YPAR does not dictate the research method: surveys, focus groups, interviews, mapping, observations, and photovoice are all used. Once young people generate, analyze, and interpret data, they engage and report to relevant stakeholders to advocate for solutions to the problem. This might involve presentations to school boards or other elected officials, health fairs or assemblies for the whole school, social media campaigns, videos, or publications.

YPAR projects in public health, education, and community psychology have focused on topics such as improving access to healthy food in low-income communities, reducing community violence, combating racial profiling by police, and overcoming educational inequalities (9–14). In India, youth used community surveys and mapping to improve access to clean water in disenfranchised neighborhoods of Kolkata, as documented in the film *The Revolutionary Optimists* (15). In a project led by San Francisco Peer Resources at an urban high school that enrolled

mostly Latino students and that had low graduation rates, students researched factors that led to student disengagement and worked to improve culturally responsive teaching practices at their school. The students gathered data on effective teaching practices by observing teachers in classroom instruction, then held professional development workshops for teachers at the school and in the district, collaborating with teachers to improve instruction (7). High school students at other sites within the same project worked to improve school lunches, reduce student stress, increase ethnic diversity and improve interethnic group relationships, address cyberbullying, and improve the school climate for English language learners.

YPAR AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT: LEVELS OF IMPACT

YPAR can be conceptualized from many lenses, with implications for understanding its relevance for developmental science and its impact on the lives of young people and the settings in which they develop. First, at the social-ecological level of a young participant, YPAR is an intervention intended to support positive youth development and psychological empowerment, with potential effects on the youth who become researchers. Second, YPAR is an intervention into the settings and systems that shape youth development (e.g., K-12 schools, after-school programs, health systems, and communities) that youth researchers study and seek to improve (16). Third, YPAR is an innovative approach to conducting scientific inquiry that engages youth as experts and coresearchers, disrupting standard assumptions about who has expertise to create knowledge about young people. This data-based inquiry can occur outside the school day or as part of a curriculum in subjects such as science, math, or social studies (17). Furthermore, YPAR and related approaches have also been used in formative research to develop and adapt interventions in the fields of prevention science and health. Next, I consider theoretical and empirical support for YPAR in key domains of potential effects.

EFFECTS ON YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

YPAR is well suited to the developmental tasks and opportunities of adolescence, especially with respect to their increased psychological autonomy (18), the importance of individual and collective sense of identity and purpose (19), and the role of responsibility and service in helping foster a sense of moral identity (20). Many secondary school environments, especially large U.S. public schools, do not respond sufficiently to adolescents' growing needs for autonomy and capacities for leadership; ironically, this developmental mismatch results in *fewer* opportunities for adolescents to participate in making decisions and rules during the transition from elementary to secondary school (21,22). Protective factors for youth (e.g., opportunities for prosocial involvement in school and community and in interactions

with prosocial peers) decrease in middle school but increase at the transition to high school, emphasizing the importance of providing leadership opportunities such as participating in more meaningful activities to use these strengths (21).

YPAR engages youth in analyzing and working to change the social, economic, and political conditions that shape their schools and communities, providing developmental opportunities for adolescents—and adults—to see youth as leaders with expertise and purpose. Identity challenges are particularly salient for youth who are marginalized as a result of ethnic, immigration, economic, or sexual minority status; these youth must develop a positive sense of identity rather than internalizing negative stereotypes held by others. Like other approaches focused on empowerment (e.g., youth organizing), YPAR aims to promote collective efficacy and critical consciousness—critical reflection, motivation, and action—that pushes youth beyond individual-level explanations of problems faced by marginalized communities to investigate and work on systemic factors (4,23).

Empirical Literature on Effects of YPAR on Youth

A small empirical literature links YPAR with gains in diverse psychological and educational domains. Most research has been in-depth, qualitative inquiry that documents growth in positive ethnic identity, academic skills, sense of community, communication skills, and psychological empowerment of youth who engage in youth-led research. For example, in terms of cognitive skills, qualitative research has reported growth in critical thinking, cognitive management of bias (i.e., being open to new data regarding research questions about which they already have strong opinions or emotions; 24), and use of math and textual analysis (25).

Recent quantitative research on YPAR also demonstrates improvements among adolescents in psychological empowerment, strategic thinking, health behavior, collective efficacy, and perceived control (see 26 for a review). For example, in a study at five urban high schools that compared classes of students who participated in YPAR to classes taught by the same teacher using a curriculum focused on peer education, students in the YPAR classes increased their psychological empowerment (e.g., strategic thinking and motivation to influence their schools and communities), but not their perceived control at school or their self-esteem.

Recent work has emphasized the relevance of YPAR for academic competencies such as those assessed by the Common Core and Next Generation Science standards (17), but researchers are just beginning to examine the impact of YPAR on academic domains. In an Arizona study on the effects of combining elective courses in Mexican studies with a YPAR component, students were more likely to pass a statewide standardized exam and to graduate than peers who did not take part in the combined elective (although the design did not differentiate the effects of YPAR from elements of the ethnic studies classes; 27).

EFFECTS ON DEVELOPMENTAL SETTINGS

YPAR enables young people to work actively on the conditions that influence their health and well-being and those of their peers. Some of these conditions are more macrosystem, such as the justice system, city zoning, and educational inequalities; others are more microsystem, targeting local conditions such as access to clean bathrooms in schools or healthier foods in stores. Developmental science provides ample evidence that contexts matter for adolescent health and development; for example, longitudinal studies have documented neighborhood contextual effects on adolescent health and well-being (28). Characteristics of settings such as schools and other youth-serving organizations that support youth development include physical and emotional safety, caring and supportive relationships, positive social norms, high expectations for behavior, and developmentally appropriate structures and rules. Other characteristics that support positive development include opportunities to build new skills, opportunities for belonging, and support for youth's sense of efficacy and making a difference (14). With respect to its potential effects on settings, YPAR can strengthen supportive and cooperative relationships among youth and with adults; provide opportunities for belonging and opportunities to build new skills in inquiry, communication, and group work; and support efficacy and making a difference.

The experience of adolescents in developmental contexts can differ dramatically depending on race, gender, and social class. For example, a neighborhood considered safe by a European American teen is not necessarily so for a young person of color, or vice versa, as demonstrated by high-profile cases such as the Trayvon Martin murder. Within school contexts, students at the same school do not experience the same climate (29); academic expectations differ by gender and race—and African American males are far more frequently referred to disciplinary actions.

At the same time that we are paying more attention to educational, health, and criminal justice inequalities in adolescence, we are also recognizing the developmental *opportunities* during adolescence that are shaped by social and geographic contexts. For example, changes in pubertal hormone and social-affective processing systems in early adolescence enhance the motivational and emotional importance of social relationships (30). This highlights the need for family, school, and community environments that provide safe opportunities for positive passions that include challenge and status instead of opportunities that lead to outcomes such as substance use, crime, or early pregnancy. As noted earlier, the few studies in this area suggest that YPAR can promote positive identity via prosocial and civically engaged roles within schools and communities.

Evidence for YPAR and Developmental Settings

YPAR projects typically seek to address a school- or community-level problem—to change a setting in a meaningful and sustained way. Studies suggest that these problems are often related to health inequalities (e.g., the density of liquor stores in a local

community, adolescents' adverse exposures to unsafe environments, community violence), school inequalities (e.g., unequal access to high-quality teaching, overcrowding, ethnic disparities in graduation rates), and other school conditions (e.g., cyberbullying, students' stress levels, unappealing school lunches). Most of the small, peer-reviewed research on YPAR and settings is based on in-depth qualitative studies. For example, in a study (31) of the long-standing Youth Council partnership based at the University of California-Los Angeles, a team of high school students spent the summer investigating the teaching, resources, leadership, curriculum, and environments of local public schools, then presented findings to state policy leaders. In another study (32) of two urban high schools, YPAR enhanced students' opportunities to influence substantive curricular and climate-related policies and practices at school beyond the typical student government spirit activities. Further empirical research is needed on the effects of YPAR on conditions, policies, and practices in the school and community settings that shape development.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF YPAR TO DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE

YPAR allows youth researchers to study sensitive health-related topics, such as sexual relationships, bullying, or gang violence. Adolescents typically have more freedom to engage directly with the ecological microsystems (e.g., neighborhood, media, peers) than do children. Families of adolescents continue to play an important role buffering stressors in the broader environment, such as community violence (33). However, adolescents' experiences with peers and environments are not controlled by their parents or guardians, many of whom may not even know about these activities. Many youth become independent and mobile via public transit or cars, and most also gain independence via their access to the Internet and social media. Thus, YPAR can enhance the validity of research on developmental phenomena because youth researchers, who have insiders' perspectives, can inform relevant research questions and methods (34,35). This perspective challenges norms about who can create knowledge and is at odds with a dominant view of adolescents—particularly low-income youth of color—that views such youth as problems rather than experts who can generate scientific findings to inform action. Along these lines, YPAR does not dictate research designs or methods, nor it is an alternative to rigorous developmental science. The question of how research findings generated *by and with* adolescents can contribute to basic and implementation science to support positive adolescent development and health is a compelling one for researchers, who have not yet studied this issue systematically.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

YPAR represents a promising approach to integrating youth expertise, engagement, and empowerment into efforts to improve

adolescents' health and well-being. YPAR emphasizes the improvement of settings that shape adolescent development and health, and can capitalize on developmentally important windows for the development of positive identity, peer social rewards, and exerting an influence. YPAR is also a systematic way for adults to learn from and with young people about developmental phenomena that can be challenging for adult researchers to understand. However, more research is needed to strengthen the empirical base regarding YPAR's effects, and identify if and how YPAR can exert a sustained impact on settings and be scaled to improve larger systems such as education, juvenile justice, city planning, and health care.

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