Upset the Setup:
Sociopolitical Reasoning in Urban Youth Organizations

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Abstract

This study examines the sociopolitical reasoning of participants in an urban youth organization that engaged in civic activism. Civic activism refers to settings where youth and adults work together to develop a "campaign" to address a social or political problem of concern to youth. The study draws on ethnographic research, including interviews, observation, and artifact analysis, to examine how youth participants reasoned about the causes of social problems that they faced in their everyday lives. The study found that veterans of the program were more likely to explain social problems in systemic terms (i.e., by emphasizing the influence of systems and institutions on individual behavior) rather than individual terms (by emphasizing problems in terms of the fault of the individual). This shift in reasoning from the beginning to the end of the year is attributed to "framing practices" in the group that focused on systemic causes of social phenomena. This is important because it shows that by working collectively on these problems youth were exposed to an alternative sociopolitical discourse from those that are prevalent in urban communities—one which lets them view problems not in terms of "blaming the victim" but in terms of public systems and policies that have effects on people's lives.

Interview with Althea, a member of YELL (7.10.03)
In terms of most students at your school, I mean, do you think there's anything standing in the way of them reaching their goals?

Althea: Them, that's it.

Can you tell me what you mean by that?

Althea: The only person that can stop anybody…almost anybody from reaching their goals is themselves. Basically that's all.

OKAY. Maybe not stop, but are there things about (your school) or Oakland that might make it harder?

Althea: Hum…I don't know because I put my blinders on when it comes to stuff…that can stop me. I ignore it or hear it but figure a way around it and through it.

Um hum. Okay. So in other words, you focus on kind of…

Althea: What I need to get done to get where I need to be.

Exit Exam Rally, downtown San Francisco, 10.02
A California youth advocacy group has organized a press conference and rally to oppose the statewide exit exam. (The exit exam has been in the news lately, because of evidence that 68% of students won't pass the math portion. These failure rates are much higher for students at Horace Mann, the host school for YELL (94%) (Californians for Justice, 2002). The advocacy group invited members of different Bay Area youth groups to come to the rally and speak, including Dolores, who is a member of YELL.

I had driven Dolores to the rally with three other YELL members. She seemed really nervous in the car, but as she stands up there with the microphone in her hand her voice sounds confident and authoritative…First she talks about how she doesn't want the state to throw another test at students, another "obstacle." She says that she has textbooks with half the pages falling out, her math teacher knows more about history than math, her geometry teacher is certified in English, and there are bad bathrooms (only one stall on the first floor). She then says something about how "we would be able to pass the test, but they don't give us the education to do it! So it's not fair."

In Althea and Dolores' words one can observe distinct ways of resolving the inherent tension between personal agency and social structure. Althea's comments articulate a highly agentic view of the relationship between self and society. According to the logic of this view, there may be some problems or challenges out there, but responsibility ultimately rests with the individual to find a way "around it and through it." Other participants in the youth programs articulated variations on this individualistic view in interviews and discussions, sometimes in an unforgiving manner. During a

baseline interview with Dolores, for example (the same Dolores in the quote above), she expressed her frustration with students who did not seem to be engaged in school:

> Interview, 10.5.2002
> Dolores: I don't like the attitudes of the students here, the negativity. They come to class, but they come to class to disrupt. They don't really let you get your education. And it's annoying.
>
> *(a little later)*
>
> *Do you think there's a way to try to address this problem, or try to improve things?*
>
> Dolores: I don't know. Honestly sometimes I feel like just kicking every student out who doesn't want to learn. You know? But that's not the way…Everyone has a right to an education. But at the same time, they're really just kind of acting....I don't know! I don't know what to say.

Dolores' hypothetical solution—and simultaneous awareness of its implausibility—echoed the way that many other youth responded to my question about how to address problems of concern to them. When I asked them to describe a way to address or improve the situation, it was common among those who defined the problem in individualistic terms to either generate a "law and order" type response—more police, stricter teachers—or a sense of helplessness towards solving the problem: "there's nothing I can do" (interview with Linda, 10.02).

The tendency to explain the causes of social problems in terms of weaknesses, limitations, or flaws of the individual did not, of course, happen in a vacuum. These young people were making inferences from personal experience by drawing on prevalent "cultural models" (Gee, 1996) about success and failure in America. Ideas about the virtues of self-reliance and individualism are common in urban America, and America generally. For example, Phillipe Bourgois' (1995) study of the underground drug economy in New York has numerous descriptions of these dealers' unforgiving analysis of their life situation:

> You have to do good for yourself in order to achieve, and you have to achieve in life in order to get somewhere. If you lay back, it's cause you want to lay back, and then you want to cry out for help later…If I have a problem it's because I brought it upon myself. Nobody gotta worry about me; I'm gonna handle it. It's my problem (p. 54).

Jay MacLeod (1987) reported similar appropriation of the cultural ideal of self-reliance and level playing field among African-American working class youth in the Boston area.

These findings from ethnographies about urban youth are in line with psychological research that describes the prevalence of the "level playing field" as a guiding cultural script in American society (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Flanagan and colleagues conducted questionnaire research exploring teenagers' political understanding and found that young people from less social privilege were more likely to endorse individualist explanations for social problems than society or systemic explanations. With rare exceptions, such as work published by Michelle Fine (2003), social scientists have generally found it to be the case that the logic of individual self-reliance is powerful and pervasive for urban youth.

In this sense, then, the quotes from Althea, Dolores, and others should not be so surprising. In fact, what is more surprising is when we observe these young people articulating, at different times, a second kind of discourse. Although it was common for youth to frame social issues in individualistic terms, especially in baseline interviews, it was also common to hear them frame them in terms of features of the social context, especially during group discussions, end-of-year interviews, and public events. For example, rather than explain the problem of youth violence in terms of youth being bad or violence-prone, many youth pointed to deeper, more systemic problems facing youth in Oakland—a lack of safe places to go, few positive role models, and limited opportunities to make a living legally. According to the logic of a systemic or societal explanation, the existence of problems like youth violence, the dropout rate, or failures on the exit exam are as much about broader social forces as they are about individual failures. In her time two interview, for example, Althea articulated a link between the problem of violence in Oakland and budget crises facing the city:

> Althea, time 2 interview
> *Do you still feel like that's an important problem or is there something else more important to you?*
>
> Althea: Actually like that's an important problem but like with the budget crises, I don't think that's more important but I think that's kind of important right now because with economy being bad and then them cutting the schools, it's not helping the problem.
>
> *Alright. How come? How is it contributing to the problem?*
>
> Althea: Because it's like, when kids are not in school, all…and they're on the streets, you're not being influenced by positive things because there's nothing really positive on

> the streets. And so they then get caught up in the whole turf war and then you'll end up either shootin' or getting shot.

Unlike other statements from Althea, in this passage she articulated a different view—that problems with the economy and budget cuts at the schools were related to violence on the streets. Far from the individualist view, which would place the emphasis on people's greed, ignorance, or willful immorality, here Althea connected the phenomenon of violence to larger trends in Oakland.

Similarly, to return to the common topic of student behavior in schools, rather than attribute widespread failure rates on the high school exit exam to ignorance and laziness, students often attributed them to a lack of quality education provided in urban schools. Dolores emphasized this point in her statements quoted at the beginning of this chapter: as a featured speaker at a rally in San Francisco against the exit exam, she critiqued not students' attitudes but instead the conditions at her school and in education in the state generally: "we would be able to pass the test, but they don't give us the education to do it!"

The juxtaposition of these different discourses, underlined by the fact that Dolores articulated both during the same week, gets to the heart of the questions that this chapter addresses. How do members of these youth groups resolve the question of social structure and personal agency? Does their reasoning reflect stable, internal beliefs across situations, or is their reasoning linked to specific communities of practice? What are the implications for youth's developing citizenship?

More than just "kinds of reasoning," these different sociopolitical discourses are relevant to youth's developing civic awareness and participation. They touch on different ideas about what social policy can and ought to be, the role of government in people's everyday lives, as well as questions of justice and fairness in the distribution of resources. Without claiming that the systemic view is always more accurate from an explanatory standpoint (or necessarily more sophisticated from a cognitive standpoint), this chapter argues that systemic reasoning is important because it creates new possibilities for civic participation. An educated citizenry is one that can entertain interpretations and explanations of social phenomena that touch on both people's personal agency and the influence of structural forces. Such complex analyses that include systemic reasoning do

not happen naturally, but instead through participation in communities of practice that offer alternative kinds of meaning-making to cultural scripts individualism and self-reliance that are prevalent in American society.

This paper will begin by situating "sociopolitical reasoning" in terms of prior research and theoretical approaches. It will then explain the methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative analyses. The results section will analyze the properties of individualist and systemic discourses and patterns in their use by participants. The conclusion will discuss implications of youth's sociopolitical reasoning for their own development as citizens.

Defining sociopolitical reasoning

Although not always going by this term, sociopolitical reasoning has been a longstanding topic of interest among scholars of adolescent development. It is principally concerned with how people construct their understanding of their social and political surroundings. It is a "meaning-making" enterprise, in that it asks how people make sense of the social and cultural context in which they live (Bruner, 1990). Because it often involves judgments about fairness and justice, sociopolitical reasoning is linked to the tradition of moral reasoning research initiated by Piaget (1932) and popularized by Kohlberg (1981). Sociopolitical reasoning was a central concern for Erikson, who felt that the principal task for identity achievement in adolescence was to develop fidelity to a set of political and moral ideals (Kroger, 19xx).

> To become faithful and committed to some ideological world view is the task of this stage; to find a cause worthy of one's vocational energies and reflecting one's basic values is the stuff of which identity crises are made. (p. 27, Kroger).

In recent years scholars of adolescence and civic engagement have shown renewed interest in questions of political understanding and reasoning. These scholars continue in the developmental tradition, but depart from Kohlberg in two important ways. First, reflecting a general shift among psychologists towards a deeper awareness of culture and social context (e.g., Burton, Obedeillah, and Allison, 1996), recent research more deeply recognizes the role of social context in young people's political reasoning (e.g., Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998; Haste & Torney-Purta, 1992; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Second, Torney-Purta (1992), Emler (1992), and others have argued that the structural-

development approach pioneered by Kohlberg is not appropriate to the social political domain. Unlike reasoning about the natural environment, which is said to obey certain universal principles (such as Piaget's classic test of conservation), reasoning about social and political concerns is culturally specific. Putting aside the lively theoretical question about whether reasoning about math and science follows universal principles (e.g. Guberman, 1999), it is less controversial to point out that there is no "natural" developmental progression to how people organize their thinking about social and political institutions because different societies are organized differently, leading to culturally-specific ways of making meaning. These culturally specific frameworks have been called by many names—"social representations" (Emler, 1992), "cultural scripts," (Markus, Mullally & Kitayama, 1997) or "available repertoires" (Haste, 1992).

Using interviews, writing prompts, questionnaires, and think-aloud tasks, scholars in this tradition have sought to map out certain dimensions of sociopolitical thinking. Flanagan, for example, offered a way of categorizing reasoning about the *causes* of social problems in terms of societal explanations, individual explanations, or some combination of both. Whereas statements coded as "societal" explained homelessness in terms of economic trends and limited job opportunities, statements coded as "individual" explained it in terms of laziness or personal flaws. Others have used this system to identify patterns in how people resolve fundamental questions about the causes of social phenomenon like unemployment and poverty (Haste, 1992; Metz, 2003; Crosby and Mistry, 2002).

Although these contextual approaches to sociopolitical cognition have begun to map out the domain in useful ways, they tend to still rely on research methods that privilege the research interaction as a window into individual cognition. (By research interaction I am referring to any social interaction that comes about primarily because of the needs of the researcher rather than the participants).[1] This tendency corresponds to an accompanying theoretical assumption, which is that people's reasoning exists somewhere inside the person, and it can therefore be assumed to be stable across situations or tasks. The key goal for the researcher is to uncover this internal set of beliefs or structures that

[1] This is not to suggest that such methods don't elicit relevant evidence about a person's way of making sense of things, but instead to say that they should not be the sole source.

guide the person's thinking. It leads to a fairly fixed, essentialist set of interpretations from what are inherently dynamic statements from the research participant. This is especially problematic when considering the meaning-making of adolescents, who are presumably exploring new ideas, entertaining conflicts between the beliefs of their parents and those of their peers, and generally *still* developing that sense of fidelity to ideals that Erikson described (1994/1968). Finally, a related limitation of current approaches is that it tends to focus on individual outcomes at the expense of an understanding of effective practices (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Scales et al., 2000). Such an approach provides few tools for understanding why and how certain settings, such as youth organizations, provide contexts in which civic engagement flourishes (Hart & Fegley, 1995).

An alternative approach, which has proven to be productive in studies of youth's mathematical and scientific understanding (Nasir, 2002; Saxe, 1991), draws on the cultural-historical theories of Vygotsky (1978). In this view, human activity is mediated by cultural artifacts, which include material tools, such as pens, cameras, and computer technology, and symbolic tools, such as political ideologies or strategies for making change (Cole, 1996). As people participate in practices, they learn how to use practice-linked tools in new ways (Rogoff, 1996). Thus development is characterized in terms of "form-function shifts" in the way that people use cultural tools in new ways to serve new purposes (Nasir, 2002). The study of development, therefore, requires understanding of social practices as well as individual people who take part in them.

The practice that is of particular interest here has to do with how members of civic activism groups "framed" social and political issues. Framing refers to the way that participants in an activity are encouraged to interpret the activity, their roles in it, and the world around them (Nasir & Kirshner, 2003). Hunt, Benford, & Snow (1999) have used "framing processes" to describe how members of social movements make sense, with each other, of the political issues that concern them. They write:

> A frame is "an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environments (Snow and Benford, 1992, 137)…So conceived, collective action frames focus attention on a particular situation considered problematic, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, and articulate an alternative set of arrangements including what the movement actors need to do in order to affect the desired change." (page 190).

Groups such as YELL engaged in specific kinds of sociopolitical framing practices, which will be discussed in the results section.

Methods

Background on the youth program

Youth Engagement in Leadership and Learning (YELL) is a relatively young program, having just started in the summer of 2001. Housed at a public high school in Oakland, YELL was initiated through the efforts of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University, in partnership with school administrators and community leaders in Oakland. The purpose of the program is to create a space where a cohort of young leaders can take action on issues they care about and in the process learn research and advocacy skills. Guided by a constructivist teaching philosophy, program staff view their role as facilitating discussions and group processes that allow young people to come to agreement about a social problem they care about and develop projects that respond to the problem through research and advocacy.

Adult facilitators generally articulate a goal for the program to be "youth-driven," meaning that youth are expected to take ownership of the projects and determine their direction, and adults primarily act as resources for youth. Projects culminate in some form of action or community outreach that involves sharing research findings and offering policy suggestions.

One director and two part-time facilitators lead the project. Participants are selected through an application and interview process. The program meets twice a week after school from October through May, with culminating events in June. Youth receive stipends of $120/month. In the year discussed here (2002-3) participants took on the problem of how young residents of West Oakland are portrayed in local media. The participants wished to redress what they considered a predominance of negative and inaccurate portrayals of themselves and their peers by persuading media outlets to offer more balanced coverage, as well as by doing their own research and producing news stories that could be distributed to news outlets and other youth.

Participants

As is common in voluntary youth programs, there is often quite a bit of change in the youth who originally begin the program and those who are involved at its completion (Cole, 2001). The group began with nineteen youth and concluded with thirteen. Of these, six were in their second year; seven were in their first year. See Table 1 for the ethnic backgrounds and gender of youth and adults who were directly involved with the program for the whole year.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Data sources:

Sources considered here include: interviews with youth participants, field notes that describe discussions held during program meetings, field notes that describe statements made during public events (some of which were audio and videotaped), and written documents and artistic artifacts created by members of the youth groups. Each of these sources offers instances of "reasoning," but under different conditions.

Analysis of sources:

An extensive coding system was developed in order to capture the kinds of sociopolitical reasoning of youth participants. This coding system had the following variables: type of problem, whether or not the problem was generated by the interviewee or the interviewer, whether or not the problem was tied to the program campaign, causal reasoning about the problem, solutions directed towards the problem, and the participant's sense of her own ability to address the problem.

Rather than treat the individual person as the unit of analysis, this coding system treats "episodes of talk" as the unit of analysis. This enabled comparisons of talk across different kinds of prompts, topics, and situations. The rule for signaling an end to one episode and the beginning of another was determined by whether a new problem was being discussed (or a new person was contributing to the discussion). An interview episode might start with the question: "are there any problems that worry you in your school or neighborhood?" A person's response would lead to follow-up questions, such as, "why do you think (*X problem*) exists?" And, "do you think there is any way to

address that problem or improve the situation?" The responses to these questions, as long as they were about the same initial "problem" would be coded as part of the same episode of talk. This was a useful technique also because it controlled for verbosity—that is, a student could be highly talkative, but as long as they were talking about the same problem, it would all be part of the same "episode of talk." Moreover, the focus was on the quality of reasoning, which could be communicated in one sentence or ten.

The specific codes that are of most relevance for this paper are: Type of Problem (88% inter-rater agreement), Causal Reasoning (81% inter-rater agreement), and Solution Reasoning (71% inter-rater agreement).[2]

Type of Problem refers to the content of the problem that was being discussed. These were generated through content analysis of the data; at this point there are 17 "types of problem" in the coding system. Examples included: student behavior in school (such as skipping or disrupting class), violence/crime, and inadequate funding for schools.

Causal Reasoning refers to the causes that were attributed to social issues. Options included: "not sure/don't know," "individual behavior," "proximal social context," and "systemic social context," and any combination of the above. For purposes of specificity, consider the problem of students skipping class. It would be coded as "individual behavior" if the respondent attributed the cause of the behavior to laziness or lack of motivation by students. It would be coded as "proximal context" if the respondent attributed the cause to a bad teacher. It would be coded as "systemic social context" it the respondent said that the reason so many students skip class is because the school lacks basic resources or the classrooms are overcrowded.

Finally, Solution Reasoning refers to the kinds of solutions that respondents generated to address the problem. The options included: "Not sure/no solution," "up to the agent of problem to solve," "law and order (e.g., stricter punishments and/or more police)," "Teaching/parenting (e.g., parents need to raise their kids better)," and "Systemic social policies (e.g., spend less money on prisons and more on schools)."

Results

[2] Agreement was calculated based on 42 cases.

This results section addresses the following questions:

1. Were there changes in YELL participants' sociopolitical reasoning over time?
2. How can we explain these changes?

1. Were there changes in participants' sociopolitical reasoning over time?

Using chi-square analysis, I found that the proportion of systemic explanations for causes of social phenomena at the end of the year was higher than in baseline interviews χ^2 (3, N=72) = 8.05, $p < .05$). Table 2 includes statements by YELL participants who were involved in the program for the whole year and participated in both interviews (eleven participants in all). A total of 72 episodes of sociopolitical talk were coded for these participants—29 at baseline and 43 at the end of the year. (This difference in number of cases reflects the fact that at the end of the year we had more to talk about, including the content of the YELL campaign). By looking at the Adjusted Residuals for each cell, one can see that changes in two codes were of particular significance: "Individual behavior" causes and causes that "Include Systemic Context." Whereas the frequency of individualist cases exceeded the expected count at baseline, it was less than the expected count at end of year. Likewise, the frequency of causes that included systemic reasoning were less than expected at baseline, but exceeded the expected count at the end of the year. (Note that this measure focuses on whether or not systemic reasoning was included in the analysis—it does not mean that youth did not include individualist explanations at the end of the year, but instead that systemic explanations were added to their reasoning at a level that was statistically significant).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The above result includes analysis of talk by first and second year members of YELL. When one limits the analysis to just those who were part of the group for the first time in 2002, the changes were even more dramatic from baseline to post, χ^2 (3, N=49) = 12.84, $p<.01$. Whereas at the baseline the proportion of individualist causal explanations was higher, at the end of the year the proportion was lower. Conversely, the

proportion of systemic explanations was lower at the beginning of the year but higher at the end.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

In order to connect these numbers with youth voices, consider the following quote (from a baseline interview) that is characteristic of an individualistic explanation of the problem. In the following interview, a YELL participant, Mimi, was asked to talk about a problem that concerned her at her school:

> Mimi (139-144)[3]
> BK: Okay, what about school (are there any problems that concern you?).
> M: People not going to class, being in the hallways, disturbing other classes…
> BK: Why do you think that problem exists?
> M: They don't care about their education. They just don't care about their life.
> BK: Do you have any ideas why that might be?
> M: I don't know.

Mimi's example is useful because it shows the link between the way the problem is framed, in terms of student behavior, and the cause attributed to that problem, in this case apathy or indifference of students. This was a common sentiment among youth participants, especially in conversations with members of YELL.

In contrast, consider a quote characteristic of systemic reasoning. According to the logic of a systemic or societal explanation, the existence of problems like youth violence, the dropout rate, or failures on the exit exam are as much, if not more, about broader social forces as they are about individual failures. In the following example, Marlene, a YELL veteran, discusses her own ideas about how to solve the problem of student behavior in school. Her concern was that too many young people in Oakland grow up with little sense of their own future or what they can accomplish.

> Marlene
> DO YOU THINK THERE'S A WAY TO TRY TO ADDRESS THIS AND HOW? AND THE IMPORTANT REAL QUESTION IS HOW.
>
> …I think that if they start young in the schools and stuff with teachers that's really going to do their job and stuff and teaching them right from wrong, give like parents that need it counseling and stuff...You know, they say that we don't have no money or whatever in California, which everybody knows that that's not true. I don't know what they've been

[3] This interview is based on handwritten notes—Mimi did not want to be tape-recorded.

> doing with their money, but they need to put it to use. They'd give you like a jail cell before they could build a school or whatever and before they could get teachers and stuff, when they know that these kids don't have the right learning and the right things that they need to succeed…that they're just going to grow up, end up in jails that they're building for them or they're just going to be on the street or something or they're going to have a job that they aren't going to be as successful as they would be with accurate teachers and stuff.

Marlene's explanation of the problem goes beyond student attitudes themselves to an analysis of a broader situation where new jails are prioritized over schools.

In summary, these quantitative data from YELL interviews show that youth participants were more likely to engage in systemic sociopolitical reasoning at the end of the year than at baseline. These shifts were more pronounced for those who were in their first year in YELL than in those who were in their second, but even as a whole group there were changes.

One limitation of this analysis is that it only includes data from the interviews, which is a unique setting. While the advantage is that the interview helps to "control" for certain variables by offering similar kinds of prompts at the baseline and at the end of the year, reliance on this method alone leaves out examples of reasoning that took place in collaborative activity, group discussions, or public presentations. To broaden the strength of these findings, and to offer an explanation of the processes by which these shifts in sociopolitical reasoning occurred, the following data analysis section will include results from interviews, field notes, and artifact analysis.

2. How can we explain changes in sociopolitical reasoning?

Through the process of working on the campaign together in YELL youth participants took part in a sociopolitical discourse characterized by distinct kinds of problem-finding, problem-framing, and problem-solving. This section will describe each of these steps in the development of the campaign. In doing so, it will show how the campaign itself, and the ways in which it was framed by adults and youth, helped to "scaffold" youth's sociopolitical reasoning so that it included greater attention to systemic causes and solutions. Scaffolding refers to supports that enable learners to perform complex tasks that they would not be able to perform alone, but which are in their "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). The unit of analysis shifts from the individual person acting

alone to the individual person working with others and the cultural tools that assist them in their work (Wertsch, 1998).

Sociopolitical discourse in YELL campaign

	Definition	Example
Problem Finding	Involves questioning the status quo; reflecting on problems in the environment that are of concern to youth	Negative social constructions of West Oakland youth ("Stereotypes")
Problem Framing	Involves framing problem(s) in collective, rather than personal, terms and/or identifying political (institutional or systemic) roots of the problem;	Media outlets and "outsiders" only portray the negative aspects of W.O. youth, which has negative affect on youth's behavior
Problem Solving	Involves finding ways to influence policy, either through action research, educational outreach, or advocacy	"Don't Believe the Hype:" Educate "outsiders" by self-publishing positive stories and holding events; persuade media outlets to write more positive stories.

Problem-finding:

Problem-finding refers to the process common in youth civic activism, in which youth are encouraged to reflect on issues of concern to them. In YELL the group took several meetings to reflect on local issues of concern to them, debate the issues, and select a topic. During this process, although adult staff members did not make suggestions or tell youth what topic to select for their campaign, they introduced artifacts that helped to frame social issues in terms of systemic policy dimensions, prior to the selection of the campaign itself. It is interesting to observe, for example, how the use of the Black Panthers 10 Point Plan helped to organize the discussion of social issues in terms of systemic problems. The following excerpt, from 10.23.04, illustrates this:

> Black Panthers Discussion (10.23.04)
> Participants: Michelle (adult program director); Ellie, Maurice, Dolores, Jamaal, Malcolm, Cindy (youth participants)
>
> Michelle explains that the piece they are about to read refers to the African American community but while reading they should try to think in terms of how it applies to everyone in West Oakland - all ethnicities. After Ellie read the first point (We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community), Michelle asked what gets in the way of people determining their own destiny? Maurice said "politicians." Answering Michelle's question of "How?" he replied, "By making decisions that are good for themselves and to help them be sure they'll be reelected." Michelle asked for Dolores to read the second point ("We want full employment for our people") and then asked what they were talking about. Jamaal said that blacks wouldn't

> get jobs because people were racist or they would get the heavy duty or bad jobs that others did not want. Maurice said that they treated people separately and segregated. Dolores said most of the companies were owned by white people.

At this point in the passage one can observe that the content of the reasoning reflects a focus on systemic, rather than individualist problems. When talking about the issue of self-determination, Maurice attributes the problem to selfish politicians, rather than an inability of people themselves. When talking about jobs, Jamaal focuses on racism rather than people's inherent laziness. The discussion continued:

> *(later in the discussion, 10.23.04)*
> Malcolm read point #4 from the 10 Point Plan, which was about housing ("We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.") Dolores said to the group, without prompting, "We still need that." Maurice said that now houses are being built and mostly white people are moving into them, forcing blacks to move to farther away places "like Pittsburg (CA). "It's not that they are taking over but lots of people are having to move out." Michelle told the group that there was a word for that happening, called "gentrification." Dolores added that the housing in West Oakland is outdated. Ellie said the houses are "breaking down." Michelle asked if landlords take care of their houses. Cindy said they don't even fix the stairs. Dolores told the group about how her father had to fix up their home and spend lots of money on it. Jamaal said the elderly are being forced to move out "because Caucasians are moving in." He said they are being forced to fix up their houses so they look nice, otherwise they are threatened that they will be kicked out. Malcolm said that people are put out of their homes because they can't make rent since the "economy is crashing."

One can see in this second part of the excerpt a continued focus on systemic issues, in this case housing. Several members talk about economic changes and processes of gentrification that are affecting themselves and their families. In this example one can see that the "10 Point Plan" helps to organize people's responses to the questions; it serves as a cultural artifact that orients one's interpretation of the problem away from personal or individualist explanations and towards a systemic analysis. Consequently, in this example, as in others like it, it would be difficult to identify a person's "own" individual reasoning—i.e., what he or she independently believed. Instead, it is more accurate to interpret the sentiments expressed as part of a discourse that was jointly constructed by participants, mediated by the Black Panther artifact.

When it came to selecting the campaign topic itself, Michelle used the 10 point plan as a framework—youth were asked to design their own "3 Point Plan" for West Oakland. In doing so, students were asked to take issues that mattered to them personally and think in terms of policies that could have an effect on those issues. Here are

instructions from the lesson plan for Korina and Mary, who were helping to facilitate these reflections with the youth:

> 10.24.02, lesson plan
>
> Ask the group: what could be a solution to help create the changes that they want?
>
> Ask them what kind of policies could a school, city government, state or nation have that could help solve the problems raised?
>
> Does everyone know what a "policy" is?
> How does it affect your community or school?
> How does it impact money spent?

This excerpt taken from the lesson plan shows the kinds of guiding questions that adults were asking youth participants. Without suggesting specific topics to youth, they wanted them to frame the issues in terms of broader social policies. Based on this activity, youth generated a list of about 8 potential problems to serve as the topic of the campaign. These were:

> Police brutality (2 index cards)
> Student motivation (4)
> Student support (non-academic) (5)
> School cleanliness (2)
> Student-teacher relationships (5)
> Packed classrooms (4)
> Stereotypes about students in Oakland (4)
> Poverty (3)
> School crime (1).

Students were then each given $1,000,000 imaginary dollars and asked to distribute their money to the worthiest problems. They could distribute it in any manner they liked. This was an individual exercise; each participant had his or her own worksheet. As it turned out, the topic that received the greatest amount of money was "stereotypes about students in Oakland." This became the problem to be addressed for the YELL campaign.

Problem-framing:

The topic of "stereotypes" is an interesting one because it can be interpreted in so many ways. On one hand it has a banal quality: of course people stereotype others. It is typical of teenagers everywhere to be concerned about this issue, that one will be judged by one's appearances rather than by who one is. Moreover, to say one is fighting

"stereotypes" has a futile, naïve ring to it—how does one defeat them? Who is the target? Who does one identify as the agent of the problem?

But for these particular youth in West Oakland, stereotypes were a deeply felt concern. Substitute the term "social constructions of black and brown youth" for "stereotypes" and the topic begins to sound more substantive, at least to academic ears. Youth participants were concerned that the only images presented in the news about people from their neighborhood were negative—as murderers, drug dealers, failures. These concerns echoed work by researchers who have written extensively about the problem of negative social constructions of urban youth (Mahiri, 2003; Way, 1998).[4]

Once the problem itself had been selected there were several YELL meetings devoted to reflecting on the problem and defining what it meant. It was a deeply felt issue for the YELL participants. They had no trouble at all generating multiple negative labels and descriptions for people from their own neighborhood. After listing of different stereotypes, the group had a discussion about the influence of stereotypes on their everyday lives:

> Discussion about stereotypes, 11.12.02
> Participants: Michelle (adult program director); Althea, Ellie, Alonzo, Malcolm, Jamaal (youth participants)
>
> Michelle asked how these stereotypes of West Oakland affect their lives.
>
> Althea: when I used to go places and tell them I was from Oakland, they'd look at me funny. And when I used to do "partyline" people would ask where you are from and they'd ask what part of Oakland. They'd say east and west Oakland are terrible and like hang up in your face. They'd think that because I live there I'm a ripper, noisy, ghetto, smoke weed, sell drugs, and that my mom is probably on crack. She laughed at her last comment.
> Michelle asked how that affects people when they are treated differently when they know you are from West Oakland. Althea said when you are trying to get a job. Alonzo said that people give you "that look." Althea agreed and said people look nervous and scared. Ellie said they are scared. Malcolm said stereotypes are unfair when we try to apply for jobs and stuff.
>
> Michelle asked how adults treat them when they know they are from West Oakland. Malcolm said they think you can't read or write because you come from a bad area and that you don't have skills and that they treat you differently. Jamaal said they don't pay as much attention to you. Alonzo, who seemed to voicing a different take on the issue, said some people don't know about stereotypes and some people don't think about them.

[4] Mahiri (2003) has written about youth in West Oakland in particular—how they are pathologized as "dangerous others" and how this problem is exacerbated by fact that their own voices are not heard in the discourse about youth.

> Jamaal brought up the killing in West Oakland yesterday again and said that people think all that's happening in West Oakland is killings because that's all they see on the news.

The reason for including this excerpt is to show that youth did have personal experience with this issue, which was tied to the particulars of their experience living in a high-poverty neighborhood with a reputation for crime, drug-use, and school failure. The example underlines their basic motivation for the campaign: there were social constructions of West Oakland youth that existed out there in the world, propagated by the media, that confronted youth negatively in their daily lives, and which they wanted to change. By framing the problem in these terms, the group was taking a problem that youth experienced in their everyday lives, and shifted the focus away from blaming youth themselves to identifying a more diffuse, complex source of the problem residing in media institutions and the social context. It reflects, in this sense, a systemic framing of the problem.

Problem solving

Problem solving represents the third dimension of the sociopolitical discourse in YELL. It involved an effort to address policies and systems that affect youth adversely; in this sense it involved treating the "source" of the problem in terms of those who generate the negative social constructions of youth. Members of YELL split into four small groups, each with a different project: focus groups, video documentary, magazine, and website. Each had a primary task that contributed to the larger goal of educating outsiders about West Oakland youth and persuading media outlets to report in a more balanced manner. These different projects came together at the end of the year, in June, when multiple events were scheduled to get the word out. The principle event was the "community forum," to which youth participants invited public officials, journalists, community members, students, and non-profit staff people. The forum itself attracted about 60 visitors, including the President of the Oakland Unified School Board President, journalists from the Oakland Tribune, and a variety of students and community people.

In addition to the Community Forum, YELL participants set up meetings with different media organizations. On one occasion the group met with a team of four journalists from a local newspaper. YELL participants shared their magazine and proposed to the journalists that they try to offer more positive stories about youth in West

Oakland. YELL participants were particularly concerned with what they perceived as an over-coverage of the homicides at the expense of other stories. The team of journalists listened to youth's suggestions, explained some of the choices they have made regarding coverage, and agreed to explore further ideas about how to increase positive coverage of Oakland youth's accomplishments.[5] Two days later one of the Tribune interns wrote a story that described the campaign conducted by YELL:

> June 11, 2003, Oakland Tribune
> McClymonds students unite to change image:
>
> Imagine seeing yourself depicted as a dropout, drug dealer, or murderer in the evening news. You know it's not true, but it feels as though there is little you can do to change the perception. That's how many students at Horace Mann High School say they feel, and they are sick of it. On Tuesday, the Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) students unveiled a magazine, Web site, and video documentary aimed at offsetting negative perceptions of West Oakland teens.
>
> *Later in the article:*
>
> Mainstream media outlets must diversify newsrooms so the people covering communities of color better reflect the people who live there, YELL students said…10th grader Malcolm said, "If you have people from the neighborhood in the media instead of outsiders, then you could actually change the negative stereotypes."

In addition to these meetings, YELL also organized different kinds of outreach to students, both at McClymonds and at a nearby elementary school. These meetings, at which YELL participants showed the video and discussed their work, reflected the interests that some members of YELL had in spreading their message to other youth (rather than focus exclusively on members of the media).

Although it is useful to get a sense of the scope of the YELL campaign, it is not the focus of this paper to evaluate its impact on media institution or community members. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the campaign as an opportunity for youth themselves to learn about a form of democratic participation characterized by systemic problem-framing and systemic policy solutions. From this standpoint, the campaign took shape as an ideational artifact that helped to support a certain kind of reasoning; one that did not abandon personal agency and responsibility, but which also included a systemic

[5] I was impressed at this meeting by the level of collegial discourse that took place. It was a discussion more than a presentation of demands. Although some youth were not fully satisfied with the responses given by the Tribune journalists, it had been an encounter characterized by genuine engagement by both parties.

analysis. This last point is illustrated by analyzing what I am calling "campaign-linked cognition," (examples of cognition embedded in the materials of the campaign).

Campaign-mediated cognition in YELL

An analysis of YELL artifacts, such as the magazine and video, reveals a strong critique of the kinds of images about youth of color that are produced and consumed in mainstream society. There were several examples within the magazine, ranging from research articles to poetry, that support this argument. One example is illustrated by an article written by Brian, a 10th grader at the school. His task was to analyze newspaper articles and determine if they were fair and accurate about youth in West Oakland. He chose four articles and analyzed each one. Here is an excerpt of his analysis, discussing one such article from the San Jose Mercury News. He was writing about an article, published on 11.15.02, which discussed the problem of violence in West Oakland.

> YELL Magazine, article by Brian
>
> *Newspaper Articles about Our Community:*
> *Why do they want to show us this way?*
>
> "Streets of Fear," San Jose Mercury News, 11.15.2002
>
> This is a negative story. They talk about West Oakland youth by saying a lot of youth are responsible for the violence in West Oakland. The media should do less stories like this because it just proves and enhances the stereotypes about youth. This also proves that the stereotype of West Oakland youth being violent is true and when people see this article in the newspaper they will see the notorious reputation West Oakland has.

In this example Brian articulates a critique of the way stories about West Oakland are framed.

In a different section of the magazine, Marlene submitted a poem, called "Hidden Faces." The subject of this poem is that the people who write about West Oakland youth are hidden from view:

> People in the backgrounds that's examining us.
> Those are our hidden faces.
> About us they can say what they want—good or bad.

And then, later:

> The message is if you ever come to the flat lands of Oakland,
> Put away what you have. If not they will think that everything is up for grabs.

A youth sees this and is now mad.
She does something err-responsible and now she is in jail sad.
All because she READ an article that she has made come to life.
But she unfortunately is living the real thing.
Yet you judge us on something you have not even seen
Those are our hidden faces.

Marlene's poem offers relevant insights about the problem of stereotypes. She begins by identifying the nature of the problem—that "people in the backgrounds" construct labels about urban youth. These people can say whatever they want; the social constructions do not appear to be constrained by how things really are. Furthermore, these particular images rebound on youth themselves. In Marlene's view, a young person might get angry about a stereotype but still end up fulfilling it rather than fighting it.

This awareness of unmet "outsiders" and journalists who were defining youth's identities for them, and in negative terms no less, was tied to a political analysis that led them to seek change in the media institutions themselves. Media outlets were a target that could actually be influenced, whose policies were discernible, who played a role in the propagation of the stereotypes. By focusing on media outlets in particular, YELL was able to turn this diffuse and complex problem into a policy issue that could have tangible results.

"Campaign-linked cognition" can also be analyzed in interviews. The quantitative data is useful in this regard because it provides a sense of the distribution of sociopolitical reasoning about the campaign vs. non-campaign activities. The following table analyzes data from end of year interviews in YELL. It shows that the proportion of systemic explanations was higher when students were talking about the problem of stereotypes than when they were talking about non-campaign related problems. This difference was statistically significant, χ^2 (3, N=33) = 9.67, $p < .05$.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

This same pattern applied to reasoning about solutions as well. Table 5 shows that when reasoning about stereotypes youth were more likely to generate systemic policy solutions and less likely to propose solutions in terms of individual behavior, in contrast to reasoning about hypothetical problems, which were more likely to propose individual

behavior solutions and less likely to generate systemic solutions problems, χ^2 (10, N=31) = 20.79, p< .05.

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

These quantitative data are an indicator of the kind of sociopolitical discourse that was prevalent among YELL members as they worked on their campaign; it is helpful to also consider how youth themselves were talking about these issues. For example, in the following excerpt Joseph, one of the YELL veterans, explains the purpose behind the campaign:

> Joseph interview
> LET ME ASK YOU IN TERMS OF THE STEREOTYPE STUFF, I MEAN, IN YOUR OWN WORDS WHAT WOULD YOU SAY THE GOALS OF THAT CAMPAIGN WAS? IN YOUR OWN VIEW...
>
> Well what the goals of that were…were to like get the media to like, you know, cover more positive stories than, you know, murders or other stories about crime. And get the press to, like, also write more columns on positive things instead of the negative things-in hopes that it could generally change, if not all, a little bit of the way people, other people in the community hold their own views towards, you know, this community, the youth in this community, and also the way people that live outside this community view this community.

Joseph's descriptions is typical of most youth's responses to that question in interviews—they wanted to change the policies adopted by local media institutions, in the hope that it would change people's views towards residents of West Oakland.

It is important to point out that there were some youth whose reasoning about the campaign included both systemic and individualist reasoning. In other words, while there was a consistent focus on systemic sociopolitical reasoning when discussing the campaign, some members combined the systemic analysis with an awareness of individual behavior. They felt that their peers contributed to the problem by doing things that enacted the stereotypes; this was reflected in end of year interviews, as well as their wish to make presentations not just to media representatives but also their peers at the school.

Summary of Results

The sociopolitical discourse that took shape in YELL was characterized by specific kinds of problem finding, problem framing, and problem solving. The campaign

problem—stereotypes—was framed in terms of inaccurate images produced by media, with negative consequences for youth themselves. Solving the problem focused on a mixture of educational outreach to peers and community members, as well as more directed lobbying of media institutions to change their policies.

The argument presented here is that the campaign itself—its goals, its tactics, its way of framing the problem—became cultural tools that provided affordances for youth's sociopolitical reasoning. That is to say, the campaign can be described as a socially distributed activity with "built-in intelligence" (Rogoff, 2003) that scaffolded youth's own thinking.

Conclusion: Implications for Youth Development and Citizenship

An analysis such as this raises important questions about developmental directionality. Is systemic reasoning better than individualist reasoning? Does it represent a more advanced level of development? Is it cognitively more complex? These are charged questions, and, of course, highly political. They touch on debates held by citizens about competing explanations of the persistence of poverty and low social mobility in urban neighborhoods—while some policymakers emphasize individual responsibility and self-discipline as the best remedy, others articulate a need for social programs to help remedy past and current injustices. Intellectuals argue about these matters as well: how can we best understand the relationship between the personal freedom on one hand and the influence of social forces on the other?

Those who, like myself, are concerned about social justice and equity for urban youth, may find it tempting to treat the individualist discourse as less sophisticated, or, even a manifestation of "false consciousness." From a neo-Marxist or post-colonial standpoint, one might interpret individualist statements as symptoms of a lack of class-consciousness; an instance where urban youth's minds have been colonized by success myths that blind them to the realities of racism, inequality, and social stratification.

But such a view must be tempered by the observation that, from the standpoint of youth themselves, the individualist discourse that has adaptive qualities in their everyday lives. The fact that many youth interpret social issues in individualist terms reflects not a form of "false consciousness," but instead an effort to reflect on their own experiences in

a way that matches their own personal goals and desires. There is a rich tradition in African-American history, reflected in the writings of Booker T. Washington, which focuses on virtues like self-reliance and individual responsibility over against an emphasis on systemic oppression. Some research has linked such views with greater academic success among African-American middle school students (Gardner & McCloyd (2001). It is probably true that one characteristic of highly resilient urban youth is precisely the quality that Althea voiced at the start of the chapter:

> Althea: …I put my blinders on when it comes to stuff…that can stop me. I ignore it or hear it but figure a way around it and through it.
>
> *Um hum. Okay. So in other words, you focus on kind of…*
>
> Althea: What I need to get done to get where I need to be.

This paper is also not arguing that the individualist discourse is necessarily less cognitively sophisticated. While there is something to the argument that more complex reasoning includes an awareness of social context, it is not the line of analysis being pursued here. This study did not analyze the cognitive complexity of sociopolitical statements. Moreover, one could have a very complex, subtle view that comes down on the idea that people are ultimately responsible for their success and systemic causes are secondary. (One might even find such arguments among the PhDs at Stanford Hoover Institute!) To return again to Althea's quote, while it involves a focus on personal behavior, it does so while acknowledging, in the background, the influence of social constraints:

> Althea: …I put my blinders on when it comes to stuff…that can stop me. I ignore it or hear it but figure a way around it and through it.

It is not so much that she is unable to see the interplay between social forces and her own trajectory, but instead that she has decided that keeping her head down is the best way to respond to this problem.

Despite these reservations about treating the individualist discourse as wrong or simplistic, there is an argument to be made that it is important for teenagers to learn how to frame social and political issues in terms of a systemic analysis. This line of argument is justified primarily in pragmatic terms: what are the consequences for youth's ideas about what it means to be a citizen? From the standpoint of democratic citizenship, the

individualist discourse is limited because it leads to an impoverished set of options when it comes to policy-making. While an individualist analysis may recognize that social constraints exist, it does not place confidence in the idea that policies can be designed in ways that have meaningful consequences for people's lives. Youth who articulated an individualist view tended to have trouble coming up with policy suggestions—they either expressed futility towards solving the problem or suggested that the only solution is for stricter punishments for people who violate the rules.

As adolescents are transitioning from their roles as beneficiaries of social goods to becoming participants in local democratic decision-making, it is important that they become aware of the range of explanations of social phenomena, and, accordingly, solutions to those phenomena. I would like to argue that an awareness of the influence of social context on human behavior does not happen "naturally" in American society. If anything, the natural progression of thinking is that one becomes socialized into the prevalent American cultural models of individualism, self-reliance, and the level-playing field. Given this cultural situation, programs like YELL are significant because they are opportunities for youth to engage in a different kind of discourse—one that acknowledges the influence of social context and looks for policy levers to influence society. Participants learn how to take a personally-felt problem and turn it into a policy concern. These are skills that any democratic citizenry should have. And they need not be at the expense of a sense of personal power or agency, as demonstrated by the sustained efforts by members of YELL to make meaningful change in their local surroundings.

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APPENDIX: Tables

Table 1: Participants' ethnicity and gender

Race/ethnicity	Youth	Adults	Total
African-American	4 (2 F, 2 M)	0	4
Latino	2 (1 F, 1 M)	0	2
Asian-American	6 (4 F, 2 M)	1 (F)	7
Arab-American	0	1 (F)	1
European-American	0	1 (F)	1
Bi-racial	1 (M)		1
Total	13 (7 F, 5 M)	3 (3 F)	16

Table 2: Changes in Reasoning about Causes (All YELL participants)

		Not sure, Don't know	Individual behavior	Includes proximal context	Includes systemic context	Total
Baseline	Count	2	9	8	10	29
	Expected Count	1.6	5.6	6.0	15.7	29.0
	Adjusted Res.	.4	2.0	1.2	-2.8	
End of year	Count	2	5	7	29	43
	Expected Count	2.4	8,4	9.0	23.3	43.0
	Adjusted Res.	-.4	-2.0	-1.2	2.8	
Total	Count	4	14	15	39	72
	Expected Count	4.0	14.0	15.0	39.0	72.0

χ^2 (3, N=72) = 8.05, $p < .05$).

Table 3: Changes in Reasoning about Causes (Just New Youth)

		Not sure, Don't know	Individual behavior	Includes proximal context	Includes systemic context	Total
Baseline	Count	2	8	5	6	21
	Expected Count	1.3	4.3	3.4	12.0	21.0
	Adjusted Res.	.9	2.7	1.2	-3.5	
End of year	Count	1	2	3	22	28
	Expected Count	1.7	5.7	4.6	16.0	28.0
	Adjusted Res.	-.9	-2.7	-1.2	3.5	
Total	Count	3	10	8	28	49
	Expected Count	3.0	10.0	8.0	28.0	49.0

χ^2 (3, N=49) = 12.84, p<.01

Table 4: Campaign-Related Causal Reasoning (end of year)

		Not sure, Don't know	Individual behavior	Includes proximal context	Includes systemic context	Total
Campaign-related	Count	1	0	0	9	10
	Expected Count	.6	1.5	2.1	5.9	10.0
	Adjusted Res.	.7	-1.6	-1.9	2.4	
Not campaign-related	Count	1	4	7	11	23
	Expected Count	1.4	3.4	4.7	13.5	23.0
	Adjusted Res.	-.5	.6	2.1	-1.9	
Total	Count	2	4	7	20	33
	Expected Count	2.0	4.0	7.0	20.0	33.0

χ^2 (3, N=33) = 9.67, p< .05.

Table 5:Campaign-related solutions reasoning (end of year)

		No solution, not sure	Individual responsibility	Law and order	Teaching, parenting, counseling	Systemic, political	Total
Campaign-related	Count	1	O	0	2	13	16
	Expected count	2.1	2.6	1.0	2.1	8.8	16
	Adjusted res.	-1.1	-2.5	-1.5	-.1	3.0	
Not campaign-related	Count	2	5	2	2	4	15
	Expected count	1.8	2.3	.9	1.8	7.7	39
	Adjusted res.	.2	2.7	1.6.	.2	–2.6	
Total	Count	3	5	2	4	17	31
	Expected count	3.0	5.0	2.0	4.0	17.0	31

χ^2 (10, N=31) = 20.79, p<.05