



Social Action Challenging Privilege and Oppression: How Emerging Adults Decide What to Do and When

Submitted by: Mayra Guerrero, Amy J. Anderson, Beth Catlett, Bernadette Sanchez, & C. Lynn Liao

Social action is critical to achieving social justice. Many scholars have called for further research on how individuals engage in social action and what motivates them to get involved. Across generations, young or “emerging” adults (age 18-25) are involved in social change efforts. Their perspectives on social action



Figure 1 Photograph by Brett Sayles. Pexels. CCO

are essential to learn how they promote social justice. Social and political involvement during these formative years has tremendous individual and societal benefits and predicts involvement later on in life. In addition to developmental milestones consistent across generations, emerging adults today face unique circumstances compared to young adults in the past.

“Our findings contribute to an understanding of motivation for social action as multifaceted, in which emerging adults may be influenced by factors across ecological levels. Additionally, emerging adults in our study also considered social justice engagement based on their unique positionalities within systems of privilege and oppression and the unique intersection of their identities influenced their approach to getting involved in social issues.”

Highlights

Young adults respond to pressing social issues by leveraging their time, availability, and innovative ideas for social change.

Emerging adults reflect on social issues broadly and think critically about how and when to become involved in action.

This work can inform strategies to engage individuals in social justice efforts aimed at creating social change across the life-span.

Methods

To examine their perceived motivations and barriers to social justice engagement and how their social identities shape involvement, we conducted in-depth interviews either in-person or over the phone with diverse students (n = 30) attending a four-year university in Chicago who had completed a service-learning course in the 2016-2017 academic year. On average, interviews took place 10 months after participants completed their service-learning course. Participants were asked what a) social action means to them, b) which social issues are important to them, c) what would motivate them to get involved with these social issues, and d) the role of their social identities in getting involved in social action. The participants included 21 women and 9 men who identified as White (57%), Latinx (30%), Asian/Asian American (13%), Black/African American (13%), Middle Eastern (3%), and/or Native American (3%).

Results

- Participants' definitions of social justice focused largely on equality for all people and often provided examples of inequality between social groups (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation).
- Emerging adults also defined social justice as including equity or equal opportunity and access to resources (e.g., good schools; “fair playing field”). Some students described social justice in terms of speaking up for issues and trying to advocate for societal change or progress.
- Students defined social justice engagement on a spectrum, from smaller-scale actions (e.g., having conversations about social justice issues, challenging harmful remarks) to larger-scale actions (e.g., protesting, volunteering for a community organization).
- Young adults considered their own social justice engagement based on their unique positionalities within systems of privilege and oppression.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Social justice is an explicit value held by the field of Community Psychology and is broadly defined as equitable access to resources, the promotion of human rights, and the dismantling of oppressive social conditions. Community Psychology recognizes social action as an important tool for promoting social justice thus bringing into the forefront the significance of investigating motivations and barriers to action. Our findings that emerging adults were motivated and deterred from social action given individual and community factors provides an ecological perspective that highlights how individuals interact with their broader social context. Further, our research highlights the ways in which positions of privilege and marginalization influence emerging adults' decisions to engage in social justice initiatives.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: Emerging adults reflect on multiple identities when discussing their reasons for engaging in action. This challenges the notion that activism is a passion for the privileged and a necessity for the unprivileged. Future research could apply an intersectionality framework to account for the complexities involved in individuals' decisions to engage in social justice initiatives based on their many identities.

Practice: Leveraging social support and connection to others who are impacted by a social issue may be a useful buffer to individual constraints prevalent in emerging adulthood (e.g. time, money). Increasing emerging adults' awareness of their multiple identities and own marginalization may increase their likelihood that they will become involved in a social issue, even if that issue does not directly impact them. To promote young adults engagement in social action, practitioners can support them in seeing the ways in which their multiple identities have experienced injustice, and that engaging in social justice promotes collective benefits beyond those directly impacted by a problem. For instance, practitioners can promote social action among emerging adults' with privileged identities by engaging them in perspective-taking and empathy-building approaches, as well as helping individuals work through the emotional challenges that can arise when confronting one's privilege. Moreover, through awareness of one's multiple identities, young people can identify ways in which they can affect change in areas that they experience marginalization and identify ways to be an ally and leverage their privilege for social change.

*Original Citation: Guerrero, M., Anderson, A. J., Catlett, B. S., Sánchez, B., & Liao, C. L. Emerging Adults' Social Justice Engagement: Motivations, Barriers, and Social Identity. *American Journal of Community Psychology*.*

Terms of use: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License It is attributed to the authors and the original version can be found here: <https://www.communitypsychology.com/social-action-challenging-privilege-and-oppression/>