

# Is There Inequality in What Adolescents Can Give as Well as Receive?

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## Abstract

Adolescents have a fundamental need to contribute to other people, social groups, and the larger society. Giving support and resources to others assists canonical developmental tasks such as autonomy and identity and is beneficial for psychological and physical health. As with the resources received by youths, inequalities along well-known social gradients likely exist in the opportunity for adolescents to make meaningful contributions to their social worlds. Greater attention to inequalities in the opportunities for adolescents to give as well as receive could reveal underappreciated but significant ways in which the development of youths from marginalized groups may be compromised.

## Keywords

adolescent development, contribution, inequality

Adolescents receive unequal resources and treatment as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Educational resources, health care, exposure to violence, overt and implicit discrimination, and demeaning stereotypes follow known social gradients according to gender, ethnicity, sexual identity and orientation, socioeconomic background, and immigrant status (Benner et al., 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; Reardon & Owens, 2014).

Is there inequality in what adolescents can give as well as in what they receive? Adolescents have a fundamental need to contribute to other people, social groups, and the larger society (Fuligni, 2019). Whether as seemingly minor as helping a friend or as profound as creating community change, giving support and resources to others assists key developmental tasks such as autonomy and identity. It also has beneficial effects on psychological and physical health. Amid calls to reduce inequalities for youths, it is important to include attention to potential disparities in adolescents' opportunities to make meaningful contributions to their social worlds.

## The Need to Contribute

Providing support, offering resources, or helping other people toward a shared goal—contributing to the social world in ways large and small—underlies the canonical developmental tasks of the adolescent period (Fuligni,

2019). The agency that defines autonomy, the roles and responsibilities associated with identity, and the ability to provide emotional support central to intimacy all depend on opportunities to contribute to other people in meaningful ways. A sense of meaning and purpose is best predicted by doing things for others. Academic achievement can be enhanced by providing youths with the opportunity to support others (Eskreis-Winkler, Milkman, Gromet, & Duckworth, 2019).

A growing body of evidence suggests that providing support and resources has direct associations with the psychological and physical health of the giver. Lower depression, fewer health problems, and lower mortality have been observed among adults who give to other people (Eisenberger, 2013). Similar findings have emerged among adolescents, including salutary effects of helping others on psychological well-being and biological markers of health, such as inflammation (Schacter & Margolin, 2019; Schreier, Schonert-Reichl, & Chen, 2013).

Psychological and physical benefits accrue because contributing to the welfare of other people cultivates developmentally advantageous skills and triggers biological

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mechanisms linked with health. Providing resources and support to other people can promote a sense of agency and achievement, support personal- and social-identity development, and help youths cultivate interpersonal skills and awareness (Fuligni, 2019). Helping behaviors engage elements of the mesolimbic reward system, which has positive implications for psychological health (Telzer, Fuligni, Lieberman, & Galván, 2014). Activation of aspects of the reward system, such as the ventral striatum and septal area, has been linked with opioid release and inhibition of the amygdala that can reduce the responses of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and sympathetic nervous system to stress and fear (Eisenberger, 2013). Excessive demands and obligations can overwhelm youths just like they can overwhelm adults, but evidence suggests that contributing to the welfare of other people serves many positive functions in adolescent development.

### **What Do We Know About Inequalities?**

Meeting adolescents' need to contribute to their social world requires settings and institutions that provide appropriate opportunities to youths. Defining the notion of contribution broadly allows for thinking beyond just service-learning activities and related youth programming to a consideration of how the multiple settings of everyday life—schools, communities, families, and peers—incorporate ways for youths to offer ideas, resources, and help. And, given the value that adolescents place on status and respect, these opportunities need to be authentic to the youths themselves and allow them to impact their social worlds in developmentally appropriate ways (Yeager, Dahl, & Dweck, 2018).

Societies have a poor track record of providing equality in either developmental opportunities or respect. Whether directly, through explicit discriminatory practices, or indirectly, through economic and social marginalization (such as underemployment and segregation), many families and communities are denied the ability to provide key experiences such as stability and quality education. It is reasonable to suspect that the same is true for providing adolescents with authentic, respectful, and developmentally appropriate ways for them to contribute to their social worlds. Pulling together evidence from diverse areas of research unsurprisingly suggests the existence of such disparities, although the picture is incomplete.

#### ***School environments***

Well-known inequalities in educational resources include notable differences in opportunities for adolescents to make contributions in their schools. Under-resourced middle and high schools face challenges in

engaging in teaching practices that incorporate active student involvement, cooperative learning, and participation in decision-making (Slavin, 1995). Many schools try. But large classrooms, teacher turnover, and rigid curriculum mandates can prevent schools from consistently offering youths the active participation in the learning process that is known to prevent the declines in motivation and achievement triggered by the transition from primary to secondary school (Eccles et al., 1993). These nonparticipatory contexts are more prevalent in schools disproportionately attended by youths from low socioeconomic, ethnic-minority, and immigrant backgrounds (Wigfield et al., 2015).

Outside of the classroom, extracurricular activities and specialized electives offer adolescents the opportunity to contribute to a group and help other people attain a shared goal (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). The relative inability of poorly resourced schools to fund extracurricular activities is exacerbated by the use of parent- and community-funded booster clubs to support such activities in wealthier communities (Vandell et al., 2015). School size presents an additional challenge. Although larger schools may offer a greater variety of activities, high enrollment in many schools translates into fewer potential slots per student for sports, clubs, and leadership (Crosnoe & Benner, 2015). The limited resources and larger sizes of the schools attended by poorer youths and those from ethnic-minority and immigrant backgrounds means that they often have significantly less involvement in a variety of activities (Laughlin, 2014).

#### ***Community settings***

Outside of school, communities may offer adolescents the opportunity to participate in organizations focused on making an impact and to volunteer in charitable and social-service activities. The availability of community opportunities for contribution, however, is limited. Only about half of American high school students report participating in such organizations (Laughlin, 2014). The nationwide lack of community opportunities becomes most apparent in areas that experience less economic investment, stability, and social capital. Thus, disparities in community participation are similar to those in schools—youths from Latino and immigrant backgrounds are significantly less likely to be involved in such activities (Simpkins, 2015; Vandell et al., 2015). The same is true for youths from poorer families and those living in low-income areas. Male youths are often less likely to participate than females. These inequalities are exacerbated by the fact that even when they do exist, few communities have the resources and expertise to provide key elements of a successful youth program. These elements include “opportunities to be efficacious, to do

things that make a real difference and to play an active role in the organizations themselves” (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 117).

Employment represents another form of contribution to the community. In addition to providing a source of income, employment may meet adolescents’ need to contribute—helping to achieve a shared goal, creating a sense of agency—if it includes age-appropriate demands that do not interfere with schooling and health. Again, disparities exist. Youths from ethnic-minority backgrounds show higher rates of unemployment than their European American peers (Child Trends, 2018). When adolescents do obtain work, the jobs held by many African American and Latino youths tend to be of low quality and unlikely to provide experiences that engender a sense of contribution.

### ***Family and peer relationships***

Families can provide adolescents with the opportunity to make contributions in a variety of ways, from the seemingly mundane to the more consequential. Relatedly, offering youths the opportunity to participate in decision-making about their lives allows for the sense that they are contributing to formation of family rules and norms. The challenges faced by many economically distressed, ethnic-minority, and immigrant families can make such an approach difficult to achieve. Concerns about safety can lead to understandably higher levels of parental control, and irregular work schedules or family stress make it difficult to provide the amount of time and support necessary for deliberative, shared decision-making processes (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999).

Nevertheless, youths from many lower-income, ethnic-minority, and immigrant families develop a strong sense of contribution by playing significant instrumental roles in their families. These adolescents are significantly more likely to have a sense of obligation to support their families, whether through daily tasks (e.g., chores, sibling care) or providing financial support (Fuligni & Telzer, 2012). The same is true for adolescents from low-resource families. The sense of agency, meaning, and purpose provided by this sense of obligation to the family provides a powerful motivation for many youths to seek advanced education and a stable future (Fuligni & Tseng, 2000).

Instrumental support to the family can be a double-edged sword, however. High levels of family obligation and financial support can interfere with the ability to succeed in high school and complete postsecondary education (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Tseng, 2004). Within high-conflict or economically distressed families,

taking on significant duties can create stress and lead to risky behaviors and substance use (Telzer, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2014; Telzer, Gonzales, Tsai, & Fuligni, 2015). The situation facing these youths highlights how simply providing more obligations to contribute may not be ideal—the amount and type need to be titrated by adults to the maturation and other demands of adolescents.

Less work has examined the extent to which there may be disparities in the opportunity to contribute in peer relationships. The fact that adolescents cite their friends as their most important source of emotional support highlights how friendships allow youths to contribute to other people. Way and Chen (2000) reported that in the context of poor, urban schools, Asian American youths are less likely to report having friendships characterized by support and trust. The same has been found for male as compared with female youths, particularly during the years of late adolescence (Way, 2011; Way and Chen, 2000). Whether these patterns extend more broadly, or whether there are inequalities in other aspects of peer relationships relevant to contribution—offering ideas, working toward shared goals—remains to be determined.

### ***What Do We Need to Know?***

Evidence suggests notable disparities in adolescents’ opportunities to make contributions to their social worlds. A focused effort is needed in order to better understand the types, extent, and impacts of these disparities in order to target the application of what we already know about providing adolescents with opportunities to contribute, as well as to generate new ideas from the youths and communities themselves.

### ***Comprehensive assessment of opportunities***

Comprehensive assessments of the availability of actual opportunities for adolescents to contribute to other people across different settings are needed. Traditionally, these opportunities have been assessed in separate areas of research that focus on families, peers, schools, and communities. Tools for assessing contributions within each setting exist, such as participation in decision-making in families and classrooms (Eccles et al., 1993; Steinberg, 2001), the provision of instrumental and social support to friends (Schacter & Margolin, 2019; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009), extracurricular involvement (Vandell et al., 2015), participation in community programming (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005), and civic engagement (Wray-Lake, Metzger, & Syvertsen, 2017). These tools should be integrated in order to develop an inventory of opportunities across the diverse

settings of adolescents' lives. The frequency of these activities should be assessed in order to estimate the optimum amount for youths, as well as disparities in their availability across known social gradients, such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background.

Equally important would be to examine youths' sense of whether their contributions in each setting are valued and have an impact. Social value and impact engender a sense of status and respect, feelings that adolescents increasingly seek as they progress through puberty and beyond (Yeager et al., 2018). Therefore, any inventory of the opportunities to contribute would need to simultaneously assess youths' beliefs that friends, families, schools, and communities appreciate and value their efforts. These features are enhanced by providing adolescents with the chance to play an active role in the planning and leadership of the activities themselves (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Assessing quality as well as quantity will differentiate developmentally rich opportunities from those that simply exist for packing a resume for future education and employment. The latter, although more available in advantaged communities, likely confer few of the positive psychological and health benefits of contribution to youths.

### ***Expanded measurement of discrimination and marginalization***

Theories of discrimination and marginalization cover the extensive ways in which resources, opportunities, and treatment are differentially received by people according to factors such as gender, ethnicity, sexual identity and orientation, socioeconomic background, and immigrant status. The measurement tools used for adolescents typically focus on experiences of direct hostility and exclusion, as well as the signaling of "otherness" that suggests that some youths do not belong by virtue of their social category (e.g., race or ethnicity; Benner et al., 2018).

The measurement of discrimination and marginalization could be enhanced by adding greater attention to the extent to which youths perceive messages that their contributions to the social world are devalued, unwelcome, and thwarted. Some measures have individual items that have come close. For example, the Public Regard subscale of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) includes "Society views Black people as an asset" (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The marginalization subscale of the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995) incorporates questions that focus on whether one feels accepted by the larger culture. Critical consciousness measures, such as that by Diemer, Rapa, Park, and Perry (2017), include

items that ask about the importance of action or a sense of agency to make social change, but they typically do not assess the belief that one's contributions are blocked or devalued.

Questions on existing scales can be reframed and expanded to more directly tap potential disparities in youths' experiences with messages regarding their contribution to the broader social world. For example, specific items could assess youths' perceptions that their attempts at contribution—suggestions, recommendations for organizational change, offers to help a group—are dismissed, ignored, or unwelcomed in various settings. Other questions may tap adolescents' experiences with more explicit exclusion from opportunities to provide support or resources or to contribute to a shared goal. More generally, adolescents' beliefs that the contributions of their particular social group (e.g., gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) are unwelcomed and dismissed in the larger society could be assessed in ways similar to the Public Regard items of the MIBI scale that ask about whether society holds a broadly negative view of African Americans (Sellers et al., 1998). Notably, the MIBI was designed to measure ethnic identity, and the suggestion to expand the items in regard to contribution highlights how emergent views of contribution may be closely tied to a parallel development of social identity (Tyler & Degoe, 1995).

Integrating the measurement of the opportunity to contribute with traditional assessments of discrimination could shed light on the complex dynamics among experienced hostility, devaluation, and doing things for other people. Discrimination has been linked with prosocial behavior toward one's group and civic engagement (Hope & Jagers, 2014), whereas other work has suggested that the direction of the association may depend on the type of prosocial behavior being assessed (Davis et al., 2016). Additionally, measuring the existence of actual opportunities to engage in such behaviors would help to flesh out the conditions in which adolescents experiencing marginalization find ways to impact their social worlds. Incorporating identity and autonomy development into these assessments would be valuable because youths at different points in their development can react differently to the experience of marginalization (Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2018). Finally, inductive approaches that do not impose preconceived definitions of what counts as meaningful contributions are critical. Inviting adolescents to play a part in the research enterprise itself, a practice known as youth-led participatory-action research (Ozer, 2017), could identify meaningful contributions that have been neglected or underappreciated by existing dominant paradigms of adolescent development.

## Conclusion

In addition to being the result of inequalities in received resources and experienced hostility, persistent group differences in psychological well-being, physical health, and educational progress could be partly due to inequalities in adolescents' opportunities to make meaningful contributions in their everyday lives. Existing evidence suggests this to be true, and greater attention to inequality in the opportunity to contribute will shed light on where to best target efforts to enhance this underappreciated yet fundamental aspect of adolescence.

Much is known about how to create such opportunities for youths, as demonstrated by programs in civic engagement, critical consciousness, and positive youth development (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011; Wray-Lake et al., 2017). Programs vary in their actual content, but they typically focus on adolescents impacting their social world and offer youths a role in decision-making and the opportunity to process the meaning of their experiences. A systematic assessment of inequalities in the opportunities for adolescents to contribute could further highlight the importance of these programs and perhaps generate new ones. The effort could also yield insights into how the experience of marginalization stimulates a sense of purpose in youths to create their own unique avenues for contribution, such as in their families, communities, and society (Sumner et al., 2018). Informal ways of contributing should not be overlooked. Interactions within the proximal settings of everyday life—such as taking care of siblings or helping a friend with schoolwork—can be fundamental ways for youths to learn to contribute to their social worlds.

Societies have long been ambivalent about whether, how, and when to allow youths to have a real impact on the broader social world. This is particularly true in contemporary societies in which adolescents spend many years in school and provide less input into family and national economies than in the past. There seems to be less ambivalence, however, when it comes to denying the chance to contribute to youths who already experience fewer economic investments and greater social hostility. The message that one's contributions are devalued and unwelcome can be one of the most consequential ways that social marginalization can effect youths, and directly assessing such experiences should be added to the agenda of reducing the inequalities that produce profound disparities in adolescent development.

## Recommended Reading

Benner, A. D., Wang, Y., Shen, Y., Boyle, A. E., Polk, R., & Cheng, Y.-P. (2018). (See References). A recent meta-analysis of the association between various forms of

ethnic and racial discrimination and aspects of adolescent adjustment.

- Flanagan, C., & Levine, P. (2010). (See References). A summary of research on the role of community and civic engagement in the development of adolescents and young adults, with particular attention to inequalities in youths' opportunity to make contributions in these areas.
- Fuligni, A. J. (2019). (See References). Lays out the conceptual argument for the fundamental need for adolescents to make contributions to their social worlds, reviews empirical evidence, and delineates psychological and biological mechanisms.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019). (See References). A comprehensive, up-to-date review of the unique potential afforded by adolescent development and the disparities in resources and opportunities available to fulfill that potential.
- Sumner, R., Burrow, A. L., & Hill, P. L. (2018). (See References). A conceptual article on the ways in which marginalization can compromise or stimulate a sense of purpose among youths to contribute and make a difference in their social worlds.
- Yeager, D. S., Dahl, R. E., & Dweck, C. S. (2018). (See References). Argues for the critical need for interventions with adolescents to support youths' need for status and respect, with implications for their need and ability to impact their social worlds.

## Transparency

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