Corresponding Author Email ID: drivas@umich.edu

From Truth-Telling to Imagining New Possibilities: Listening to Youth, Families, and

Communities of Color

Deborah Rivas-Drake

University of Michigan

Abstract

Every day that people of color are hyper-surveilled, harmed, threatened, diminished, dehumanized, and disenfranchised is a day absent of racial justice. In my view, this special section illuminates two critically important truths of oppression: First, it shows up physically, psychologically, and socially (e.g., the sequelae of racism), and second, the locus of the cause of the oppression is in institutions and systems. Yet, that is not the whole story. Although we need to continue including the voices and capacities of racially marginalized people in telling the truths of oppression, we also need them to be part of radically re-imagining those oppressive systems in the first place.

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Every day that people of color are hyper-surveilled, harmed, threatened, diminished, dehumanized, and disenfranchised is a day absent of racial justice. We will know there is racial justice when all youth are equally afforded the right to health, education, opportunity, political participation, and wellbeing, and that they are afforded these rights based on an unconditional assumption of their inherent humanity and worth (Rivas-Drake, Montoro, & Agi, in press). Of course, we have a long way to go to achieve this ideal. But with every study, including those in the special section and others in the full series of special sections, we have another chance to clarify how we can move closer to this goal.

As a field, we seek to describe, to the best of our abilities, some of how the truths of oppression are discerned in the lives of youth and families. Often, we draw on the integrative model (Coll et al., 1996) and the phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST; Spencer, 2007) to conceptualize the tug-of-war between oppressive forces in systems and everyday social settings, on the one hand, and the family and community processes, on the other hand, that protect youth from the full impact of such forces. In my own research, for example, my collaborators and I have examined youths' and caregivers' experiences of discrimination and immigration injustice (e.g., Constante et al., 2021; Cross et al., 2020). We have also explored the messages young people receive about who they are and can be as well as how youth receive, interpret, and challenge them agentically (e.g., Bañales et al., 2020; Montoro et al., 2021; Rivas-Drake, 2011; Rivas-Drake & Witherspoon, 2013). Youth encounter these messages everywhere—at home, in school, among peers, on social media, in communities, and in society via social institutions. Too often the messages are ones of devaluation,

dehumanization, or indifference. But we have also seen that the messages youth receive are ones of hope, dignity, resistance, and joy—parents, educators, and community members help youth to craft stories about their worth and dignity that are defined not by racial subjugation and subordination but rather by their capacity to resist, by their community ties, and by their rich and complex histories (e.g., Blanco Martinez et al., in press; Pinetta et al., 2020).

A Focus on Sequelae and Causes of Oppression

In my view, the special section illuminates two critically important truths of oppression: First, it shows up physically, psychologically, and socially (e.g., the sequelae of racism), and second, the locus of the cause of the oppression is in institutions and systems. We need to know and document how oppression undermines the optimal development of youth of color. The collection of articles asks, what are true costs to youths' health and wellbeing? Gee and his colleagues (2019) have written about how racism literally takes time away from people of color by diminishing their quality of life and ultimately, shortening their lives–the theft of time goes hand in hand with the theft of health. We see evidence of such theft across the literature focused on adolescents. For example, two meta-analyses—one by Benner and her colleagues (2018) and another by Yip and her colleagues (2019)—tell us that for youth, more exposure to discrimination is associated with: more depressive and internalizing symptoms, less positive well-being and self-esteem, less positive academic outcomes, including achievement and engagement, and more externalizing behaviors, risky sexual behaviors, and substance use. Exposure to discrimination also disturbs and diminishes sleep quality among adolescents of color (e.g., Yip et al., 2020).

The theft of youths' health and positive development is reflected in the papers in this special section. Chen and colleagues (this issue), for example, provide further evidence that

experiences of discrimination diminish sleep duration among racially minoritized adolescents. Taking a closer look at COVID-19-related racial discrimination, specifically, with Chinese American adolescents, Zong and colleagues (this issue) found that youth who were directly and indirectly exposed to anti-Asian discrimination experienced greater anxiety. Wang et al. (this issue) show that stress due to xenophobic perceptions of foreignness undermine the adjustment of Latinx youth, in particular, those who reported having darker skin color.

We absolutely must keep documenting the truths of oppression from the perspective of those who are marginalized. However, one of the challenges we face is how to balance the air time given to individuals and that to contexts through which oppression manifests. This is not a new challenge but one that is particularly salient in the context of this topic. That is because as many of us would agree, it is critical to document not only the costs but also the aspects of young people's environments at all levels–interpersonally and institutionally–that exact those costs.

To that end, I am excited to see studies that undertake the work of uncovering the structural and institutional elements of contexts that undermine racial justice. This requires a more expansive and inclusive engagement with diverse methodologies, which we see in the papers included in the special issue. For instance, Janssen and colleagues (this issue) explored racist gatekeeping using an audit approach. They examined whether guidance counselors at STEM-focused high schools responded to emails from mothers who differed only in their name, which were selected to signal a different ethnic/racial group, e.g., an Asian American name was ostensibly an Asian American mother and so on. To explore how White teachers who teach predominantly students of color feel about race and how students of color feel about race when primarily White teachers teach them, Davis and colleagues (this issue) adopted a qualitative methodological approach. They use interviews to derive qualitative insights, especially regarding

how color-evasion transpires among White teachers, which ultimately, hinders anti-racist and anti-xenophobic practices. They found that teachers' color-evasive view of race paradoxically contradicted what youth knew to be true in their own experiences of racism with teachers in that setting–a pattern we have seen before in the education literature as well.

Another approach to deconstructing the risks created by contextual dynamics can be found in White and colleagues' (this issue) paper, which turns our attention to change in intraindividual shifts in exposure to White neighbors over time rather than a static assessment of racial composition. What does it say to young Latinx people that it is not their neighborhoods but rather White neighborhoods that are viewed as, as the authors put it, "great places to raise children" and more deserving of resources? Often the goal is to encourage people of color to flee their communities for the promise of the White neighborhoods, and other times White families make their way to Latinx neighborhoods via gentrification. White and her colleagues ask, simply, is the residential manifestation of Whiteness itself good for Latinx children? Their provocative hypothesis is that residing among more White families can be toxic due the hyper surveillance and scrutiny of Latinx people. And indeed, they found that youth who moved to more White neighborhoods or who had more White neighbors over time in their own neighborhoods experienced an increase in externalizing symptoms.

Current Truths and Possible Futures

Focusing on the oppressed also means that we must discover what role they should take in dismantling oppression. One point of contention here is the idea that the work of dismantling oppression should fall only on the dominant group or the people who benefit from racist systems, for example. Here, I offer some thoughts that my colleague and I have articulated in a new model of anti-racist identity and action among Latinx youth (Bañales & Rivas-Drake, in press) for a

different special section in this larger series focused on "good trouble, necessary trouble." Specifically, we know that even as Latinx people in the U.S. are racialized and minoritized, their experiences vary—as we see, for instance, in Wang et al.'s (this issue) analysis of phenotype and White et al.'s (this issue) examination of exposure to neighborhood Whiteness among Latinx adolescents. We argue that we should not presume that by virtue of being racially minoritized Latinx youth, or really any youth of color, would automatically know what role they can have in dismantling oppression.

To be clear: Some do know, but this knowledge does not manifest spontaneously! To be intentional about this, we need to ask, how do Latinx youth see their role in disrupting white supremacy and how do they understand anti-Blackness among Latinx people? What do they make of the COVID-19 related anti-Asian hate that Zong and colleagues (this issue) speak about? How does anti-Indigeneity circumscribe their understanding of what it means to be Latinx? How do Latinx youth develop a sense of agency to disrupt racial injustices that directly impact their own ethnic/racial communities while also being prepared to work in solidarity with others? To be able to be part of the dismantling process, Latinx people must be invested in freedom not only for themselves but also for all those who are oppressed, including those who are among the oppressed *within* the Latinx community itself, including those who are Afro-Latinx, those who hold unauthorized status, those of Indigenous heritage, and so on. We also argue that dismantling oppression involves seeking freedom through methods that do not themselves perpetuate or replicate oppressive structures. What experiences support the development of an anti-oppressive imagination?

Conclusion

As a set, the studies in this special issue help us to advance racial justice by identifying places in which we might intervene to change practices through which racism and xenophobia operate. Understanding how oppression manifests, its roots in institutions and systems, and ultimately, what we can and should do about it are all part of one collective story that is continuously being told. We cannot move to anti-oppressive approaches in an informed way without having learned these truths from the people closest to them. But that is only one part of the story. As a field we need to continue including the voices and capacities of racially marginalized people in telling the truths of oppression, but we *also* need them to be part of radically re-imagining those oppressive systems in the first place. Considering the scholarship included in this special section (and the rest of the series), I am optimistic that our field is moving in the right direction.

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