

The Role of Activism in Combating Feelings of Helplessness Among Chicago Adolescents: A
Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Background: Racism is a public health issue that has both immediate effects and also long term, generational consequences. Racism's impacts spans from increased incidences of chronic physical health and mental health conditions to lost job opportunities and affordable housing. Racism is pervasive and has persistent effects on a significant portion of the US population. Previous research has explored the effects of direct racism on adults' health outcomes, but there is limited data on the impacts of vicarious racism on adolescents and their emotional health. Moreover, there is even more limited data on successful strategies to help minorities combat the negative effects of racism in their lives.

Objective: This study seeks to examine how adolescents interact with social media and racially-charged stories online. We then explore the emotional responses and strategies adolescents utilize to combat those emotions.

Methods: We conducted four (N=4) focus groups with adolescents aged 13-19, with a total of 18 participants. The research team conducted semi-structured focus groups. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

Results: This paper focused on three main themes that emerged from the data: *helplessness*, *resilience/support systems*, and *activism* as a coping strategy. Adolescents mentioned feelings of helplessness as an initial reaction to racist events and a sense of lack of control. On the other hand, they were able to identify people in their lives who they lean on for support and how activism can sometimes combat those feelings and help them feel like they are making a difference.

Discussion: Adolescents are astutely aware of racial conflicts. Not only are they able to properly identify the conflicts, but they have the nuanced view of how racial tensions affect them and people around them. The insights gained from this focus group may allow stakeholders to consider anti-racism strategies that include addressing adolescents' emotional needs, including the lack of control, and developing coping strategies on familiar platforms, like social media.

Introduction

Racism as a Public Health Concern

Last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a policy statement declaring that racism is not only a social determinant of health, but that failure to address it will undermine health equity for children and their families [1]. This statement comes after years of increased political, social, and structural recognition and awareness about the unequal systems in this country and worldwide. Historically, these systems were made to benefit the majority and disenfranchise the minority, contributing pervasive inequality. Racism can be defined as “organized systems within societies that cause avoidable and unfair inequalities in power, resources, capacities, and opportunities across racial or ethnic groups”. Racism is the unfortunate result of unjust systems which presents as beliefs, stereotypes, prejudices, or blatant discrimination [2]. Through these manifestations, racism can have personal and public effects, such as undermining academic and vocational attainment and in turn decreasing the overall success of the country [1]. Moreover, regardless of its presentation, it adversely impacts racial and ethnic minorities’ health outcomes. For example, a 2009 meta-analysis found that perceived discrimination produces elevated stress responses, is related to participation in unhealthy behaviors (such as consuming alcohol), as well as nonparticipation in healthy behaviors (such as sleep and exercise) [3].

Furthermore, numerous studies have found strong, consistent associations between racism and negative mental health outcomes, typically defined as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety [2-6]. A common explanation is the traditional stress and coping model, which refers to the idea that stress results from an imbalance between perceived demands and the personal resources to deal with them. Though the traditional stress and coping model stated that racism is a source of negative experiences that eventually lead to poor health outcomes, recent

studies have stipulated that alternative pathways, such as prenatal experiences, conscious and preconscious emotion regulation, and negative affective states may also contribute negative health outcomes [5]. These alternative pathways can form as early as in childhood and the American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement suggests that increased infant mortality, increased rates of poverty and malnutrition, as well as a decreased sense of self-worth are all potential consequences [1]. Additionally, the policy statement comments on the effects of bystanders who are also adversely affected by racism, a phenomenon known as vicarious racism.

Vicarious Racism, Consequences, and Online Media

Vicarious racism, a concept first delineated through “linked lives” or the idea that events affecting one individual also affect others, has been an area of study in recent years [7-14].

However, there have been limited studies that have specifically looked at the consequences of vicarious racism. In one study they found that, among minority undergraduate students, vicarious racism is the most common form of racism reported (with 99% reporting at least one experience of vicarious racism in the past five years and only 90% reporting direct racism experiences) [7].

In a qualitative study, they were able to identify four vicarious racism themes, including trickledown racism and normalization of racism, both of which had reported negative impacts on graduate school experiences of doctoral students of color [8].

In a 2018 systematic review done by Heard-Garris et al., they postulate that because children do not develop inside a vacuum, they are uniquely vulnerable to perceived threats or maltreatment of the people in their environment (family, friends, caregivers, etc.) [9]. In other words, witnessing the prejudice and discrimination of people they care about, or people that look like them, can also have an impact on their physical and mental health, perhaps through the realization that they too can experience that same prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore,

witnessing this event can occur on a microscopic (e.g., seeing the maltreatment of their parents) or macroscopic level (e.g., seeing the maltreatment of someone who they do not have a personal relationship with, but they identify with). On the microscopic level, African American women have reported that, as children, observing racist incidents and/or hearing their parents talk about their own experiences with racism, was a significant stressor that perpetuated into their adult lives. Some consequences of this increased stress on minority women are thought to contribute to the disproportionate increase in infant mortality seen among minority populations, not dissimilar to the effects of direct racism [10-11].

On the macroscopic level, an excellent example of this is through online social and news media. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research on vicarious racism exposure through these platforms. Notably, a 2019 Tynes et al. study found that while there is research on generalized traumatic events online, there is limited research on both racist events and studying minority youth populations [12]. This can possibly be attributed to the relative novelty of social media and the increased awareness of the importance of the consequences of being constantly exposed to news stories. However, both have important negative consequences that warrant further study. For example, during the George Zimmerman trial for the killing of African American adolescent Trayvon Martin, a research team sought to determine how race-based rejection sensitivity (RS-Race) and racial identity can intensify negative psychological reactions to this incident of vicarious racism. RS-Race was defined as “a process whereby direct or vicarious experiences of race-based mistreatment, devaluation, and discrimination lead people to develop anxious expectations that they might be victims of similar treatment in future situations”. College participants were instructed to provide demographic data (as well as RS-Race data), read a description of the Zimmerman court case, and assign a verdict. Afterwards they provide their

reactions on the outcome measures. They found that these components can lead to negative psychological reactions, such as more negative affect and lower forgiveness [13].

Tynes et al. also found a significant association between traumatic events online (e.g. Facebook/Twitter), specifically viewing distressing news directed at one's own racial-ethnic group or those with the same immigration status, and both PTSD and depressive symptoms [12].

This is important because it is the first study of its kind that both addresses online exposure to racially traumatic events and with a study population that includes adolescents. There is an increased need for studies such as this, given the close relationship between adolescents and the online world. Pew Internet Research found that 95% of adolescents have access to smartphones and 45% say they are online "almost constantly" [15]. Additionally, this number appears to be even higher for African American and Latinx adolescents. How this easy access to online sources, and therefore vicarious racism, impacts adolescents has yet to be fully understood.

There have also been journalistic reviews on the psychological effects of viewing videos depicting racism. In 2016, Huffington Post article spoke about how the police shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile can send minority communities, especially African American communities, into a vicious cycle of rage, despair, and helplessness, which in turn can lead to feelings of desensitization [16]. While articles like this are important to raise awareness of the potential dangers of posting and spreading videos like this, more empirical research needs to be done to examine the relationship between this specific trauma, the emotional changes, and the subsequent coping responses that minority communities have in place.

Coping Responses to Racism and Vicarious Racism

Coping responses are an important part of how people interact with the world around them. Daily, individuals encounter stressors that may cause adverse reactions for them physically, mentally, or socially and they must develop a way to deal with that stressor. Coping strategies have proven invaluable with regards to racially stressful events and may determine the extent to which individuals are affected by said events [17-20]. In 2012, Hoggard, Byrd, and Sellers published a study comparing African American college students' coping mechanisms with racially and nonracially stressful events. During the study, they asked participants to keep a diary and note stressful events. Through this they found that participants used less planful problem solving and more avoidance coping strategies in racially stressful events compared to nonracially stressful events [21]. Later they explain these findings by saying that the racially stressful events were inherently different in their presentation than the nonracially stressful events. In other words, most of the racially stressful events occurred in an interpersonal, public context which may make coping strategies like avoidance more understandable. However, this study does not speak to the emotional consequences of such coping strategies. As mentioned above, racial discrimination can have negative impacts on the health outcomes of minority populations so it is imperative to find coping strategies that do not serve as a temporary solution, but that can prove beneficial in the long-term. For example, in a 2018 quantitative study, they found that ethnic identity, social support, and anger suppression significantly attenuated the relationship between discrimination and adjustment problems in Mexican-origin adolescents [22]. Additionally, engagement coping strategies like problem solving, have been found to prepare college students to respond to microaggressions, a more subtle form of racial discrimination [23].

Problem solving can present in a myriad of ways, one such way being in the form of political activism: seeing an issue and purposely addressing it on a broader scale to enact more lasting

change. Studies have shown that political activism can help navigate sociopolitical conditions that create the racial stressor and in turn alter, or eliminate, the stressor itself [24-26]. By doing so, they can improve mental health outcomes. For example, a 2017 quantitative study found that political activism serves as a protective factor on stress and depressive symptoms for Latinx college students. Of interest, they found that higher levels of political activism may in fact worsen experiences of racial microaggressions and relate to more stress and anxiety in black students [27]. This suggests that there may be a difference in either the quality or type of microaggressions that these two groups face or perhaps, how the groups engage with or benefit from political activism, which warrants further research.

In terms of coping and addressing vicarious racism, specifically through online media, studies show that technology can catalyze the development of activist movements. In recent years, awareness of police brutality towards minority populations has increased and, for some people, it resulted in the conception of the Black Lives Matter, a movement that seeks to increase awareness about systemic racism and promote resilience among Black people [28-29]. In a call to action for counseling psychology leaders, Crowell et al. talk about the origins of the Black Lives Matter movement, and how social media allowed for a rapid increase in recognition of this and other notable events, such as Ferguson, where unarmed African American adolescent Michael Brown was fatally shot by the police and the community held month long protests for police reform, and Mizzou, where minority students called for administration changes after multiple incidents of racial slurs and aggression. Additionally, they discuss how technology, through blogs, research, and general networking can bring people together in a way that allows for establishment of support and resilience building [28].

To further understand the role of online media to cope with racist events, the British Journal of Social Psychology published a 2019 qualitative study where they looked at the function of social media, namely Twitter, in developing the Black Lives Matter movement. They found that social media can have both a positive and negative impact on the growth of movements. On one hand, Twitter users were found to promote competing definitions of the issues that the movement represents, leading to tension. On the other hand, they found that constructions of difference between identity groups and social issues can be used strategically in movements to retain influence and advance social change [29].

Purpose of the Study

Most of the research that exists with regards to racism, mental health, and coping strategies, not only focuses on college students or adults but also focuses on quantitative data. There is a need to not only acquire more qualitative research but also to inquire about the insights of adolescents, as adolescence marks the beginning of a critical transition from childhood to adulthood. For example, with regards to activism, do adolescents view activism in the same light as other age groups? What role does social media, which is a significant part of the adolescent experience, play in not only exposure to racism but response to it? This hypothesis-generating, qualitative study seeks to better understand adolescent reactions and responses to racism, both direct or indirect by using focus groups of racially and ethnically diverse adolescents from a large urban city. Better understanding adolescents' responses may allow public health professionals to work alongside adolescents to develop resilience strategies, policies, and advocacy tools to combat the influence of racism on adolescents' health.

Methods

Study Design

This qualitative study was approved by Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago Institutional Review Board. The study was conducted using qualitative research methods to produce descriptive data [30]. A standardized semi-structured interview guide was developed, and questions focused on interactions with social media, access to news media, experiences of racism in and through news media, and responses to such stories. Four (4) focus groups were conducted during the study period of November 2018 to April 2019, with 3-6 participants in each group (18 participants in total). Each focus group was staffed by two research team members experienced in focus group interviewing. Before each focus group session, participants also completed demographic information, including age, education, and how they choose to identify, summarized in Table 1. They were also given the opportunity to introduce themselves to group members using code names. Focus groups were recorded using tape recorders and transcribed using Descript transcription software [31]. Interviews were an average of 51.25 minutes, ranging from 19 to 83 minutes. Participants were encouraged to respond to each question, but also clearly given the option to decline any question or leave the group without any penalty. Each participant was given a gift card to show our appreciation.

Study Population

Adolescents eligible to participate in this study were 13-19 years of age at the time of enrollment, able to read, write, and communicate proficiently in English, and available to attend the focus group in the greater Chicago, Illinois area. Interest in the group was generated through flyer dissemination throughout public libraries, public spaces such as Starbucks, and two pediatric outpatient clinics where members of the research team worked. Additionally, in order to engage participants particularly interested in the study, researchers directly spoke at

community youth organizations. All interested adolescents were encouraged to contact the research team via a secure email address or phone number. Focus group session times were arranged based on the participants' and researchers' availability. All focus group sessions took place in private meeting places. Participants and their parents completed the appropriate consent and assent forms.

Qualitative Analysis

When data collection was completed, transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative coding software Dedoose [32]. Four coders (A.C., P.E., L.B., and N.H.G.) independently identified key statements and associated them with emergent codes. Codes were then reviewed in an interactive and iterative fashion among the research team for consensus. Once achieved, codes were organized into themes and subthemes. Select subthemes were further analyzed by this researcher to further understand circumstances with which subthemes emerged.

Results

Findings

This qualitative analysis was part of a larger study which looked at three major categories: youth experiences with media, racism as depicted through personal experiences and news/online, and responses to racism. This paper will focus on adolescent responses to racism with specific attention to emotional responses (namely *helplessness*), *resilience/support systems*, and *activism* as a coping response. See Table 1 for demographic information.

The Many Faces of Helplessness

During data analysis, helplessness was brought up multiple times by various participants.

Adolescent participants stated that contrary to the belief that they are not aware of the world around them, not only are they aware, but witnessed how pervasive the effects of discrimination are and often times this made them feel overwhelmed. Of note, helplessness presented in a variety of ways. Some participants stated a general state of helplessness, others felt it more when situations were more personal, and others expressed helplessness as a feeling of defeat. A general sense of helplessness was typically the first response participants would express regarding their emotional state after viewing something racist on the news. Adolescents repeatedly stated that they view this as the world we live in now and that there is nothing that can be done to change it. One adolescent said,

“Sometimes I don’t say anything. I’m just like okay. Another day in the life.”

As the conversation of helplessness continued, many adolescents found that they were able to identify specific circumstances when they felt more helpless than others. Many of them found that when the situation, whether in person or online, related to their friends, family, or themselves, they felt particularly unable to cope. During one focus group, when asked about racist events, the participants brought up the Chicago Van Dyke trial, which had reached a verdict a few months before the group met. Jason Van Dyke was a Chicago police officer sentenced to 81 months after fatally shooting Black adolescent Laquan McDonald, something that hits close to home for these Chicago adolescents. Participants recalled the consequences of the court ruling and how they felt. Of note, minority participants still felt a sense of loss of control even with the court ruling against Van Dyke. For example, one adolescent stated,

“The whole Van Dyke trial I was downtown... They [the authorities] were literally like we’re closing this down and so like I was with my roommate and we were like freaking out and...like I’m not gonna die today and I’m like, what are we doing? Like what is going on?”

On the other hand, some participants stated the opposite with regards to feeling more helplessness when it was personal. They said that they can regain their sense of control when the situation pertains to them but feel powerless when it relates to others. These feelings may be exacerbated by their inability to help in the way they desire. One participant said,

“The only way that it could actually change my mood is if it’s to me. As opposed to if it happened in front of me and it happens to me then I could subjectify the issue and actually get angry, but if it’s not towards me. I mean, I can talk about it and try to change the situation, but ten times out of ten...There’s nothing I can do.”

This idea of not being able to change situations is woven into the feelings of helplessness, and for adolescents is an unfortunate common theme with their lives. When they see something that is not right in their environment, thinking that what they do will not make a difference takes a toll on their development. This is particularly seen with viewing racist events. Feelings of hopelessness affect how they interact with racist material and many adolescents quoted these feelings as the main reason they choose not to get involved. One expressed the futility by saying,

“Usually, unless it’s truly personal or it’s somebody that I know, I won’t get involved just because it’s a waste of time. Every time I think we’re making progress, I see another 13-year-old on YouTube who commented something stupid. Those are the people that you just cannot change their mind because their minds don’t want to be changed.”

Another adolescent confirmed this thinking by saying,

“It depends, I think just because I do...Again, I know that people are going to think whatever they’re going to think and they’re not going to change their minds until they’re ready or until they decide like, ‘Okay, I’m the one that is deciding it is wrong to be racist, not you telling me it’s wrong.’ People are going to do what they’re going to do, they’re going to say what they’re going to say.”

Overall, feelings of helplessness were, for many adolescents, associated with adverse emotional responses to racist events, both in person and online. However, when asked for positive coping mechanisms to deal with such events, adolescents were quickly able to identify the people, family and friends, with whom they confide, grieve, and find support in.

Resilience and Support: Lean on Me

A common coping mechanism for the participants in the focus groups was relying on social support systems. Many adolescents reported that talking through the events that they experienced or witnessed with people they are close to helped them process what had happened. In doing so, they felt like it improved their resilience and ability to approach new situations with a different perspective. Additionally, a lot of participants also used the coping mechanism of distraction to get through difficult situations. They talked about how just doing something else, even for a brief period of time, really helped them reset, similar to how talking worked for other participants.

With regards to types of social support, the two main systems were family and friends. From a family perspective, most participants cited their mothers as a huge source of information, comfort, and wisdom for them. One adolescent said,

“My mom is probably the best source because she’s like the one that makes me come back to reality.”

Another adolescent agreed by stating,

“She’s[my mom] wiser and like has known me. She knows like what to say to me.”

Mothers seem to be the go-to parental figures for adolescents. The participants mentioned that their mothers have an innate ability to de-escalate their emotional states and bring them back to a more neutral position. One adolescent explained why they believe this is the case and why mothers are so vital in helping them through tough situations.

“My mom will be like, do you want to talk about it? And then like that’s what brings me back to like when it feels like someone wants to hear what you have to say when it feels like you’re being heard even though you know, it’s just one person. I feel like that’s very uplifting.”

The other type of social support the adolescents focused on were friends. A lot of them mentioned hanging out with their friends at school functions, playing video games with them, or joining student groups to discuss topics with them. One adolescent said,

“Like you were mentioning with the peers... We’re in a couple programs that definitely let us talk about our views on stuff and keep us tough.”

Social support to build resiliency seemed to be an important part of most adolescents’ lives.

Moreover, the idea of finding groups to talk about issues that they are facing paved the way for many adolescents to talk about what things they are doing in their schools, their communities, and beyond to improve their lives and the lives of their friends.

Activism: the Why and the How

Another coping mechanism that has been useful for the cohort is activism, defined here as taking action collectively or individually to bring about meaningful change to address issues of social justice, which in this case would benefit marginalized people [27]. Many of the adolescents spoke about how, after feeling sad or helplessness, doing something helped them cope with the world around them. They agreed that while they could not always make huge changes to the systems, sometimes even helping other adolescents feel less alone also helped them. They spoke about activism in many ways, sometimes in the abstract and other times in a concrete manner.

For example, one adolescent said,

“I feel like if we have the right coping mechanisms and like the right ways to deal with it then we can use those negative emotions for like good, you know because then we can be more passionate and like change our actions to spread...loving awareness for like these kinds of things.”

The altruistic nature of their activism was another common idea that the adolescents expressed.

Not only do they want to bring about change to improve their futures, but they understand the

importance of reaching out a hand and pulling up others with them. Another adolescent further emphasized this by stating,

“Like I might repost something that I feel passionate about but like I also try to spread things like positivity and like happiness and like I don’t know because in a way it makes me feel better. But I also want other people to know that like it’s not all bad. And I don’t want everyone to be discouraged because then nothing will get fixed.”

The idea of reposting something on social media is common method of activism among adolescents. Because they are so intricately intertwined with the online world, many of their examples of activism involved it. They spoke about how or why they comment or share stories on social media (usually Snapchat, Instagram, or Twitter). A lot of the adolescents would choose to simply share a story with their friends so that they can discuss it privately. Others would directly message (i.e. DM) the original person who posted to talk about what they thought was inappropriate. Occasionally they would make a point to publicly call out the person who posted, but that was rare because they preferred not to engage in “comment wars” and further perpetuate their feelings of helplessness. When they did publicly call out the person who posted, usually they would do so when the story either directly involved themselves or their friends, but other times they would speak up when a racist story really bothered them. One adolescent said,

“There was a time that somebody I know on his Instagram story, he posted like he was on a plane and I guess there was an Indian-Pakistani man and he took a picture of him and was like ‘I’m scared’. I let him know that that was very ignorant, and then I posted it on my story, and made a comment about it being ignorant as well.”

Another way adolescents exercised their right to demand change was through in person activism. This presented in many forms, including through school programs, participating in activism in their communities, and even through advancing their own knowledge of current issues. Here is where adolescents showed that they are more astute than society may give them credit for and

that they do know how, when, and where to help enact lasting change. For example, one adolescent explained the situation by saying,

“It’s funny because a lot of people think that teenagers are not socially aware, but I think the friends that I keep around me, once we start talking about something it goes on and on and on and on. We’re always like, even though we have a low attention span, I think that for my peer group that we’re always talking about something. Being in programs that allow you to express yourself and actually talk to other people about how you feel on certain issues actually I feel like help everyone get a greater view and perspective on the different minds that we do have and how to accept how other people feel. Sometimes you just can’t accept it, and arguing with somebody is not wrong. It’s just how you argue [matters].”

Another adolescent, in speaking about educating themselves, said,

“I’ll just like try to make new friends and like try to like get into clubs and like just like research more about topics that like so I can be more educated and then I can educate like others.”

In terms of doing things in their schools, adolescents specifically talked about student groups that they run and why they created them. Notably, multiple adolescents talked about talking to the administration and coming up with an actionable plan to create a better, safer environment for the students of color in their schools. A lot of them talked about how this not only helped create a better space in school but helped them understand more about the political system in this country and how to effectively promote change. Another way that they saw change was through their own communities in Chicago. They spoke about how getting involved in what was going on around them, either through physically being present or helping organizations that they support, was helpful. One adolescent said,

“Yeah, and then sometimes my response is it’s something I can do something about, like right now. ‘Oh, hey this thing is happening with police. No Cop Academy [a Chicago campaign to urge the city to invest money into marginalized communities instead of a new police training academy] meeting is next week.’ I was like, ‘I’m going.’ Or I’m sending support to one of my orgs that is actively going against whatever just happened.”

Overall, adolescents were able to understand the need to channel the emotions they were feeling about racist events into something more positive, but also somewhat understand the importance

of allowing oneself the moment to grieve and feel that pain. Moreover, they reflected on how these unfortunate events can actually bring them closer together as a community to continue on and fight another day. One focus group participant succinctly stated,

“[C]hanneling that energy into something creative, into something movement-based helps a lot with not getting bogged down by it, and then also taking the moment to cry and letting it go, those are the positive things that come from it, and community. That’s one thing I can say about black and brown folks, is that no matter how much people push on us, when they push on us, they push us together and we are able to lean on each other.”

Discussion

This study is one of few that focuses on adolescents’ perspectives of vicarious racism. Moreover, this work adds to literature attempting to understand the interaction between vicarious racism and online media. We found that adolescents have ready access to online racism. They reported extensive internet usage and were able to easily provide examples of racist stories, posts, etc. when on a variety of media platforms. This aligns well with previous research on adolescents’ social media usage and access to racist stories [7,15]. Moreover, the ubiquity of racist stories can perhaps be explained by the increased online anonymity and online confidence users feel to express such opinions, a concept supported by Keum and Miller [33]. This provides further evidence that strategies to monitor and lower adolescents’ interactions with social media and promoting healthier usage of the internet is necessary.

Secondly, we found that adolescents do experience emotional changes in response to seeing racially charged content online. Helplessness appeared to be an initial response of most adolescents, which supports previous statements from both mainstream media and research studies [12,16]. Both state that it is not uncommon for adolescents to experience depressive symptoms and go through a cycle of negative emotions in response to exposure to racist material. Helplessness was mostly categorized by its relation to the individual themselves and in their

relationships. There was an overall sense of despair that, while not uncommon among minority adolescents, is cause for concern about their mental wellbeing and the potential educational/vocational consequences. However, many adolescents were able to identify people in their lives that provided a sense of support and even bolstered their resiliency. This suggests that making sure minority adolescents have that support system can potentially ameliorate some of the harmful effects of exposure to vicarious racism [22]. This also supports the work that current pediatricians, teachers, child psychiatrists, and caregivers do to provide safe environments for adolescents. An extension of their work could possibly include educational sessions for parents and caregivers to increase awareness for what their adolescents are most likely exposed to and help them equip themselves to have these difficult conversations with their children.

Thirdly, in response to the emotional changes many adolescents felt, activism served as a coping mechanism. Many adolescents felt like the ability to act allowed them to feel a sense of control, which is similar to problem solving as a coping mechanism [23-26]. When talking about activism, adolescents were able to impressively describe the activities that they participate in and also discuss their views of the world and how the world views them. They were able to state that they have a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical climate around them beyond what most adults attribute to them. This important finding may aid in directing future interventions and research. Specifically, adolescents may need outlets to enact change, such as group activities, instead of education on racial issues. With regards to activities that they participate in, the most common activities appeared to be related to working with school organizations and their communities. This is supported by their previous statements that the issues that impact them the most are more closely tied to their families, friends, and communities.

From an online perspective, adolescents did not give as many examples of organized activism as expected. On one hand, adolescents presented a plethora of examples of in-person activism they participate in within their communities and social circles. However, this study reinforced the idea that adolescents are spending a significant amount of their time on social media and are exposed to racist content through social media and as a result, their initial responses to this content occurs on social media. Though they were able to talk about immediate responses, such as reposting material or commenting on other's posts, creating more complex platforms, to bring about a more prominent online movement, were not mentioned. This could possibly be due to the way the questions were asked and the limited time we had for the interviews. This could also be due to the lack of need for most adolescents to have an extensive online network since they see their friends and classmates daily and can talk about issues in person. However, this underutilization could be an area for growth, given its success with other groups among the adult population [28-29,33-34].

Limitations

Our study should be interpreted within the context of our limitations. First, our sample size was small; however, generally qualitative studies have smaller sample sizes. Also, our focus groups shed light on an understudied area of research. Secondly, our participant population may be subject to bias due to our recruitment strategy. Many of the adolescents mentioned that they were involved in youth groups in school that discussed racism, bias, etc. so our participants may not represent the greater Chicago adolescent population, in terms of social and political awareness and activism. Thirdly, our focus groups were mainly female participants. There is a need for further research that includes male participants. Fourthly, as with all focus groups, reporting bias is a potential issue that needs to be considered. One issue with focus groups is that the

participants could have been saying what they thought the researchers wanted to hear. Moreover, if any adolescent had a differing opinion on a certain issue, they may have been less likely to state it if they were worried about what the rest of the group would think. Lastly, the scope of our study did not include the analysis of specific racist content that adolescents consumed on social media, such as news articles, stories, videos, and comments.

Implications

Our study aimed to understand how adolescents interact with social media and racist content online. Investigating adolescent exposure to racism online and their responses are critical because of the negative health outcomes, changes in emotional state, and the potential area for engaging adolescents on a deeper level with regards to activism. This study provided potential avenues for further research and suggests how adolescents cope with such experiences. Further, this study suggests that adolescents engage in conversations about the intricacies of both racism and vicarious racism. By focusing on adolescents, we can get real-time understanding of what it is like to be a minority adolescent in today's society. Adolescents offer invaluable insights on navigating racism today. Moreover, adolescents reported finding solace in discussing such complex issues, which may allow them to process their feelings. Future research that utilizes an in-depth analysis on racial identity and subsequent responses to vicarious racism is needed. Specifically, exploring if Hispanic/Latinx adolescents respond differently to vicarious racism online than Black/African American adolescents will be beneficial. Lastly, a few of our White/Caucasian adolescents brought up their thoughts on vicarious and were able to identify that they came from a privileged perspective. Additional studies that examine the response of majority racial/ethnic adolescents to online racism and work as allies to their minority friends could prove beneficial in creating more supportive environments for all adolescents.

Conclusions

Racism in all its forms is a public health issue that not only affect children in the short term but can impact their health in the future. Adolescents are more astutely aware of racial conflicts than initially believed. Additionally, adolescents have a nuanced view of how racial tensions affect them and those around them. The insights gained from this study will impart stakeholders with the knowledge needed to create strategies for adolescents dealing with racism online.

Specifically, strategies that address helplessness and activism may be helpful. Both adolescents and the adults that support them can work to ameliorate the immediate and long-term consequences of racism and create a better environment for future minority adolescents to thrive.

| Table 1. Participant Demographics, N (%) | |
|---|------------|
| Age (mean, SD) | 16.4, 1.64 |
| Gender | |
| Male | 5 (28%) |
| Female | 13 (72%) |
| Ethnicity | |
| Black/African American | 7 (39%) |
| Hispanic/Latinx | 8 (44%) |
| White/Caucasian | 3 (17%) |
| Education Level | |
| Grades 7-9 | 7 (39%) |
| Grades 10-12 | 8 (44%) |
| College | 3 (17%) |

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