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Rallying Over Balloting: The Origins of Millennial Activism

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Abstract

Activism by U.S. millennials, such as the March for Our Lives, Occupy, and Black Lives Matter, has reversed a national decline in civic engagement. Much of the scholarship has focused on how, not why, millennials participate in activism. This qualitative study of 121 purposely sampled millennial participants seeks to identify the origins of millennial activism. This study operates from a generational lens. Interviews of each participant from 2015-2017 went through two cycles of coding to reveal five progenitors of millennial activism: Family and Friends, Institutions and Organizations, Encounters with Activism, Media and Popular Culture, and Hate and Harm. The study recommends that educators synthesize the progenitors of millennial activism into effective civic engagement pedagogy.

Keywords: Millennials | civic engagement | electoral politics | civic participation | activism | protest | rally | social justice | Donald Trump | neoliberalism | techno-determinism | democracy | action | activism | media literacy | voters

Introduction

On February 14, 2018, a school shooter at Stoneman Douglas High School murdered seventeen people and injured fourteen others (Chuck, Johnson, & Siemaszko, 2018). A mere five weeks later, thousands of students in hundreds of cities across the globe responded by organizing a wave of demonstrations known as the March for Our Lives (Grinberg & Muaddi, 2018). The participants, which included many individuals born between 1982-2004 also known as the millennial generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000), framed their demonstration as an illustration of the youth led “revolution” against gun violence (Grinberg & Muaddi, 2018). They demanded that elected officials address and mitigate the murderous influence of gun violence in American schools (Grinberg & Muaddi, 2018). The sheer size and influence of these demonstrations led activists from the civil rights era, as well as media pundits, to muse that the March for Our Lives could be a harbinger of a 1960s like wave of protests and activism (Bois, 2018; NPR, 2018).

Much like the civil rights protests of the mid-20th century, the March for Our Lives did not occur in an historical vacuum. It was a response to the continual episodes of gun violence in American schools. Following the 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton Colorado, which resulted in twelve murders and twenty-four injuries, an additional 220,000 U.S. students have been involved in a school shooting (Woodrow-Cox, Rich, Chiu, Muyskens, & Ulfman, 2018). Despite American voters overwhelmingly support for policies aimed at reducing gun violence (Barry, McGinty, Vernick, & Webster, 2013), elected officials have yet to implement policy to effectively address gun violence (Kupchik, Brent, & Mowen, 2015).

Advocates (Bois, 2018; NPR, 2018) and scholars (Levine, 2014) agree that civic engagement is required to develop and implement policy that addresses and mitigates the pervasive impact of gun violence. Civic engagement refers to individuals “acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one’s communities. This includes a wide range of activities, including developing civic sensitivity, participation in building civil society, and benefiting the common good” (Jacoby, 2009). Civic engagement can manifest in numerous ways including “political and non-political processes” (Ehrlich, 2000).

Millennials consistently partake in the non-political process of activism (Warren, Sulaiman, & Jaafar, 2014). Activism refers to “long-running communication campaigns to organize protests and publicize issues” (Bennett, 2003). Millennials are active in a series of liberal leaning activist movements such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy, Women’s March, DREAMers, Democracy Spring, combatting Climate Change, ending gun violence, and more (Milkman, 2017). They have also played a critical role in traditional conservative leaning activist movements such as the so-called pro-life movement (*The Atlantic*, 2018), as well as the alt-right opposition movements to feminism and politically correct speech (Hawley, 2018).

Until the wave of millennial activism, national levels of civic engagement were declining due in large part to a lack of engagement among Generation X (Gaby, 2017; Jennings, & Stoker, 2004). The goal of this study is to produce findings about the origins of millennial activism that can be synthesized into effective civics pedagogy. I recommend that effective civics pedagogy is integrated into American schooling with the goal of increasing national levels of civic engagement to force policy changes on such issues as gun violence.

Literature Review

Scholars have long been interested in the origins of activism (Smith & Ferguson, 2018; Teske, 1997). Much of the scholarship has focused on education. Scholars argue that civics education with a service-learning component (Dewey & Nagel, 2008) engenders students’ civic engagement (Metzger, Erete, Barton, Desler, & Lewis, 2015). In fact, some civic courses, known as community civics courses, identify student activism as a student learning outcome (Reuben, 1997). However, compared to previous generations, millennials had less access to civics courses in kindergarten through high school (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011,) and higher education (Kiesa et. al, 2007). If anything, this scholarship explains millennials’ civic illiteracy (Shapiro & Brown, 2018) and ambivalence toward democracy (Foa, Mounk, & Inglehart, 2016) rather than the origins of their activism.

There have been few studies on the origin of millennial activism. Scholars have argued that when college aged millennials are the victims of racism, they become activists (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016; Livingston et al., 2017). However, these studies do not account for the victims of racism who do not engage in activism. Other scholars have examined college student millennials and argued that it is not an experience that spawns their activism, but environmental factors such as exposure to activism (Fahs & Swank, 2011); safe unified community spaces (Lantz et al., 2016); or caring and compassionate parents (Kimball, et al., 2016). These studies do not account for the non-college student

millennials who engage in activism despite having different experiences or environmental conditions.

The majority of scholarship on millennial activism has largely focused on digital tools and communication technology. In fact, scholars argue that millennials should be referred to as the “net-gen” (Tapscott, 2009) because the Internet and handheld technologies did more to shape the generation (Donnison, 2007; Winograd & Hais, 2011) than the coming of the millennium. These scholars argue that millennials were the first generation born with digital technologies in the home, and as a result they expect freedom of choice, customization, collaboration, integrity, and agency in every aspect of their life including activism (Arcinue & Grata, 2016; Becker, 2009; Tapscott, 2009; Lindström, 2010). Some critics contend that digital tools engender a non-impactful form of social media activism known as “slacktivism” (Stein, 2013). The pejorative term implies that millennial activism is doomed to fail (Serchuk, 2011) because the participants are visionless (Zillner, 2017), lazy and checked out (Ganucheau, 2018), addicted to their phones, narcissistic (Stein, 2013), and wasteful (Horowitz, 2017). However, Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya (2017) argue that this scholarship conflates the ineffective act of slacktivism, which refers to online activities with no connection to grassroots organizing, with activism, which, whether online or not, is a productive form of civic engagement connected to grassroots organizing.

The origin of millennial activism has largely been analyzed in relation to digital tools and technologies. Despite the opportunities they afford millennials, digital tools and content can be both a distraction from (Biccum, 2011) as well as an outlet for, but not necessarily the cause of, activism (Baptist & Bell, 2014). In the last decade, scholars have offered a techno-utopian analysis of millennial activism and digital tools. They argue that digital tools are germane to millennials’ civic engagement. The access and use of digital tools is thought to engender civic engagement (Jenkins, 2008) and empower users through the communicative process (Castells, 2013; Paulin, Ferguson, Jost, Fallu, & Schattke, 2014). The centrality of digital tools in 2011 youth movements such as Occupy and The Arab Spring is often cited to support these claims (Castells, 2015; Polletta, 2014).

However, the techno-utopian analysis is challenged by critical scholars who argue that it is based on conjecture and notions of techno-determinism (Fuchs, 2017). Techno-determinism is a reductionist theory that presumes technology is what determines society’s structure and human behavior (Foust & Hoyt, 2018). Critical scholars contend that digital tools are not the cause or even essential to millennial activist movements. Rather, they help expand the reach of movements that are already built upon face-to-face interaction and traditional forms of organizing (Fuchs, 2017; Wilson & Dunn, 2011). This is evidenced by millennial movements that are led and focused on issues affecting communities that have limited or no access to digital tools. For example, youth of color participate in social movements (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007), but less than 70% of them have access to digital tools (U.S. Census, 2017). Similarly, the undereducated (Fox, 2012; Mitra, Serriere, & Kirshner, 2014) and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Phipps-Soeiro, 2016; Preus, Payne, Wick & Glomski, 2016) participate in social movements, but less than a quarter of Americans, largely from areas that over represent these factors, have broadband access (Vick, 2017). This strongly undermines the assertion that digital tools beget millennial activism.

The lack of clarity regarding the origins of millennial activism demonstrates the need for a qualitative study to identify the origins of millennial activism. Beginning with Howe and Strauss' (1997) paramount study *The Fourth Turning*, scholars have predicted that millennials will transform the nation in a new political direction (Cahn & Cahn, 2016; Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Howe & Strauss, 2009; Milkman, 2014; Winograd & Hais, 2008; Winograd & Hais, 2011). Over the next decade of research, scholars have argued that millennials are a civically engaged generation (Eagan et al., 2015; Kiesa, et al., 2007). However, there is a dearth of qualitative studies on the origins of millennial activism. Forenza, Rogers, and Lardier's (2017) qualitative study on what facilitated and supported activism did engage millennials, but they were only five off the twelve participants. The small sample size and focus on undocumented millennials rather than a more diverse range of millennials is not helpful for identifying the origin of millennial activism. This study will contribute to the scarcity of qualitative studies examining the origins of millennial activism.

Methodology

This study employs a generational lens to analyze millennial activism. Mannheim (1952) is viewed as a sociological progenitor of the generational lens, arguing that significant differences between age groups occur about every 30 years. A generational lens posits that a generation, like other identities, is a major factor in determining human behavior (Martin & Tulgan, 2006). A generation shares a common set of perspectives and expectations resulting from their lived experience in the shared structures created and shaped by the previous generations (Howe & Strauss, 2000). A generational analysis assumes that the collective experience of a generation results in a collective reaction to their lived experience. In terms of millennials, a generational lens has most often been applied to the work place (Macky, Gardner, & Forsyth, 2008; Marston, 2010; Tapscott, 2009) and schooling (Arensdorf & Andenoro, 2009). However, this study employs a generational lens to identify the origins of millennial activism.

Table 1. *Overview of participants' racial/ethnic and gender identities*

Race/Ethnicity	Woman	Man	Declined to State	Total
African American/Black	6	5	0	11
Asian/Asian American	5	4	0	9
Latinx	8	8	2	18
Middle East/Northern Africa	3	3	0	6
Mixed Race	8	10	0	18
Native American	1	0	0	1
Native Hawaiians/other Pacific Islanders	7	7	0	14
White	27	11	0	38
Decline to State	4	1	1	6
Total	69	49	3	121

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The research question for this study asks about the origin of millennial activism. Answering that question requires appreciation for the size and diversity of the 70 million people in the millennial generation (Sherman, 2018). Identity plays a key role in how individuals experience the world (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966), especially those representing marginalized communities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016). In order to identify the origins of millennial activism, these identities must be represented in the study. As a result, I sought a diverse set of participants across racial/ethnic and gender identity (See Table 1) as well as age (See Table 2), college enrollment status (See Table 3), and sexuality (See Table 4). The diverse identities represented by the data makes this study both relevant and transferable.

Table 2. *Overview of participants’ age*

Age	
16-20	27
21-25	47
26-30	30
30+	17
Total	121

Data Collection

I purposely selected volunteers for this study between 2015-2017 at four community colleges and two universities in the San Francisco Bay Area as well as the California Faculty Association Capitol Rally (CFACR). CFACR saw college faculty and students protesting for better funding and conditions on California State University campuses. I chose these locations for numerous reasons. First, each college and university had a dense population of millennials on their campus. Second, there were racial and economic disparities between the campuses which enabled a more diverse sample size. Third, I chose the California Faculty Association Capitol Rally because it included students and activists from around the state who were concentrated in Sacramento, California for two days. This enabled vast data collection from a diverse range of people in a concentrated area and time frame.

Table 3. *Overview of participants’ college enrollment status*

College Enrollment Status	
Not Enrolled in College	34
Currently attending college	79
Decline to State	8
Total	121

Participants were approached as they entered and left campus toward the parking lot. When I approached each participant, I asked their age to determine if they were a millennial. If they were a millennial, I then asked if they had ever been involved in any

form of activism “such as a protest, march, rally, or petition campaign.” The millennial participants who had been involved in activism were scheduled for either a phone call or in-person meeting, where they were interviewed about their activist experiences (See Appendix A: Interview protocol). Those who had not engaged in forms of activism were not invited for interviews because the study is designed to analyze the origins not the barriers to millennial activism. The interview protocol focused on the motivation for their participation in social movements and protests. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes each. Each interview was recorded, but in order to secure candid responses, the participant’s name was left out of the recording and subsequent transcription. I transcribed the interviews and only I had access to the interview data.

Table 4. *Overview of participants’ sexual identity*

Sexual Identity	
LGBTQ	21
Decline to State	6
Heterosexual	94
Total	121

Data Analysis

Once the data was collected, I transcribed the interviews. All demographic information was categorized based on the participant’s oral responses (See Appendix A: Interview protocol). The study’s racial and ethnic categories do not reflect the participant’s words verbatim. For example, if a participant defined themselves as Hispanic, they were added to the Latinx category. If a participant defined their racial/ethnic identity as Native American and Black, they were counted as “mixed race.”

The qualitative data went through two-cycles of values coding. The transcribed interviews were maintained in a digital document. During the first cycle of coding, I employed a values coding lens to summarize and condense the interview content with words and phrases that were typed onto the document. In the process, I coded for reappearing terms and phrases used by the participants. Values coding revealed the participants inferred values, attitudes and beliefs (Saldaña, 2015). I ended up with over 1000 codes. All of the codes were then copied into a spread sheet with the statement the code referenced attached. This enabled the researcher to identify the identity of the participant associated with each code through word searches in both the digital document and spreadsheet. During the second cycle of recoding, I employed a classification reasoning approach to synthesize the codes and generate themes from the prominent features of the qualitative data record (Saldaña, 2015). This involved organizing the codes into categories based on similarities.

Findings

The data revealed five origins of millennial activism: family and friends, institutions and organizations, encounters with activism, media and popular culture, and hate and harm. These findings complement the literature on the relationship between the origins of millennial activism and technology (Fuchs, 2017); education (Metzger, Erete, Barton, Desler, M. K., & Lewis, 2015) racism (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016; Livingston et al., 2017); exposure to activism (Fahs & Swank, 2011) and loved ones (Kimball, et al., 2016). The findings are critically important for educators seeking to develop effective civic pedagogy.

Theme 1: Family and Friends

The data revealed that family and friends are pivotal for sparking activism amongst millennials. Family can be a catalyst for activism through leading by example, such as being a politician or taking part in activist movements and events. In addition, family members ignited millennial activism by inviting millennials to attend protests. A 22-year-old Latinx male cited his parents taking him to the 2006 Day Without Mexicans when he was five years old as responsible for his activism. A 22-year-old indigenous female participant remarked that when she was a “little girl” her family viewed California Governor Pete Wilson as “the enemy” due to his anti-Latinx immigration rhetoric. Her parents took her to the protest and “apparently as a little girl I was like ‘Chicana power, Pete Wilson is the Devil.’” She cited this as her earliest memory of having interest in activism.

In addition to action, family discussions and stories are responsible for participants’ activism. Participants cited aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents, and parents as inspiring their activism through discussions and storytelling about a father who was a “freedom fighter,” a family “drove out of Russia for prejudice and racism,” and rehashing experiences during the Civil Rights Movement. Family discussions about social and political issues stimulated activism such as a participant who noted that he “was raised to always stand up for people that didn’t have a voice”.

Some participants reported that resentment toward family members’ behavior and lifestyle manifested itself in activism. A 23-year-old white male participant claimed that his conservative upbringing fueled his rejection of conservatism and activism against it. Many others noted that domestic difficulties associated with drug-addicted parents, divorced parents, absentee parents, or a single-parent household contributed to their empathy for others which resulted in their activism. A 26-year-old mixed race male participant indicated that in his experience, an individual can “relate to injustice because they have also been treated that way, so they have a deeper passion, a deeper drive to, for whatever cause that they’re fighting for”.

Similar to family, friends play a key role in participants’ activism. Participant activists credited friends and significant others with spurring their activism through the discussion of political news stories in high school and college. Participants reported developing empathy for others based on the experience of their family and friends. One participant, who identified as heterosexual, said he became a gay rights activist because, “I have a lot

of gay friends so it's definitely something that I strongly support." In addition to family and friends, harmful experiences and episodes of hate initiated millennial activism.

Theme 2: Hate and Harm

Participants reported that their activism derived from experiences with tragedy and hardship. They cited episodes of hate and harmful behavior aimed to both themselves and others as original motivations for their activism. Numerous participants cited the murder, death, and suicides of loved ones as triggering their interest in activism. A 23-year-old white female noted, "I certainly think that, like, having someone close to you die makes you aware of your own sense of mortality and I don't think that most people have that awareness unless they've had someone close to them die."

Participants cited a series of events, which they described as hateful, as being responsible for inspiring their activism such as Trump's travel ban, which targeted Muslims, California's Proposition 8 campaign, which sought to block same sex-marriage in the state, police shootings of unarmed people of color, the forced deportations of immigrants, and the 2003 War in Iraq as inspiring their activism.

In addition to witnessing national campaigns and events, participants also reported that hate and harm in their community inspired their activism. A 23-year-old South East Asian male credited witnessing the harm caused by the "huge economic divide between the rich and poor" in his community as what made him pursue activism. Some participants reported that the hate and harm exemplified in national news stories was reminiscent of what they had witnessed in their own community. A 27-year-old Filipino-American female explained that Black Lives Matter resonated with her to the point of attending their march because she had witnessed the "death of [a Latino man] who grew up in my old neighborhood" at the hands of police. Participants also reported that being a part of a diverse community that battles and attempts to mitigate hate and harm arouses their activism. A 26-year-old Asian American male remarked, "I live near a community where people are active, about issues in the community, occasionally see protesting." Similarly, a 25-year-old Asian-American male noted that growing up with "different racial diversity," from a "young age" engendered activism.

No single person was brought up more as an instigating factor in participant activism than Donald Trump. Participants reported that Trump's campaign and presidency have been a major factor for them to engage in activism. Participants described Trump as "a jump start [to] a lot more people being active." A 20-year-old Latino male proclaimed, "All my protesting starts in 2017, right after Trump got elected." A 17-year-old mixed race female conveyed, "Honestly [it] wasn't until Donald Trump got elected president" that she started protesting. She went on to say, "To be perfectly, bluntly honest, that is what made me want to start getting involved." A 19-year-old mixed-race female recounted that she became an activist when Donald Trump was elected. A 29-year-old female said that, when it comes to her activism, "I will give all the credit to Mr. Donald Trump," because during his campaign, "he preached hatred to our nation and condoned inequality. So, once he was inaugurated, and talks of a women's march started to spread, I immediately knew I wanted to participate." Participants cited Trump's justification for inequality, negative comments about women, "making racism even more evident," promises to repeal women's health

care and Planned Parenthood funding, and embarrassing leadership style as reasons for their activism.

Trump’s presidency may explain why participants reported such a grim picture of the world, full of hate and harm, and in need of repair by their generation. A 23-year-old white female elucidated that she was motivated to protest by “the general fucked up state of the world.” The participants responded with a feeling that it is up to them to mitigate hate and harm in the US. A 20-year-old Latino male remarked that his activism started “after Trump got elected, I felt like I should start helping out more ... I was irritated by the racist slurs, the profanity that was being thrown out, it wasn’t just Hispanics and it wasn’t Caucasians, it was every single color talking a lot of hate towards everyone.” Similarly, a 34-year-old female who is a self-described “white southerner” claimed that her activism was sparked by attacks on “diversity.” She felt like “we’re regressing” and “it’s really important for people to make their voices heard ... Call your representative, like, stage a walkout, stage a boycott, you know, hold a rally! Like, you know, like, have a street protest.”

In addition to hate, participants reported that their perceived mistreatment by economic and legal systems inspired their activism. A 29-year-old Latinx male recounted, “I was an employee at Tesla, and I was in a protest about working too much overtime ... Yes, working too much, especially on the weekends, triggered my interest in the livable wage issue.” A 27-year-old Mexican-American female felt wronged by the health care system noting, “I need healthcare. I am diabetic and I need medication to help me get through the day. With all the talk going about health care reform, it could cause higher premiums and higher copayments.” In a similar case, a white 36-year-old female participant became an activist after an employer cut wages. She notes that, “when it came to my job and livelihood that was the first time [I participated in activism].” A 20-year-old African-American female reported, “I was 16-years-old, and I was sexually assaulted. I reported the incident to the Berkeley Police department. My case hasn’t been sent to the courtroom. In my view, sexual assaults are swept under the rug.” They cited these personal exploitations by the system as prompting their activism.

Participants noted that their activism was caused by the empathy they developed through experiences of hardship and abuse. A 27-year-old Filipino female participant noted that food insecurity stirred her activism because when she was young, she “would have to decide if we were going to take the bus to school or walk just so that we would eat.” Participants also explained that being the victim of sexual assault, racism, and bullying encouraged their activism. A 27-year-old African-American participant described their upbringing as “traumatic because of racism, you never know how your life is going to go when you’ve been exposed to so much hatred.” A 27-year-old White female noted that, “honestly so much of it is my own experience ... It reminds me of when I was twelve years old and this older woman kept trying to molest me and rape me, and nobody cared.” In addition to hate and harm, participants cited institutions and organizations as relevant to their activism.

Theme 3: Institutions and Organizations

Numerous institutions and organizations played a key role in inspiring participants’ activism. Religious participants cited their faith and religious organizations as being responsible for their activism. In addition, participants cited community organizations as

rousing their activism. One participant clarified that although he had not attended a protest, he had volunteered for the Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center where he taught “nonviolent solutions to youth” on how “to build within the communities to solve problems.” Similarly, participants cited after-school programs as sparking their activism. A 27-year-old black male participant remembered, “The first protest I recall attending was when I was in the fifth grade. I protested against the war against Iraq...I went with my afterschool program.”

Participants also cited places of employment and labor unions as responsible for their activism. A 27-year-old Filipino female participant commented, “I work at a women’s shelter as well, so I would say that’s a big part of my activism.” In addition to the actual labor of a job, experience with a union can inspire activism. A 31-year-old white female reported that her interest in activism resulted from, “[her] job, it’s a union job, and we have people that are called shop stewards and they’re kind of like somebody that works your same job but is also there to kind of protect you. [It is] kind of inspiring and kind of makes you want to follow their footsteps to make sure you help out other people the way they’ve helped you out.”

The overwhelming majority of participants cited their experiences in the classroom and on campus as a critical factor in fostering their activism. In both high school and college, participants claimed that they had a teacher or series of teachers that stimulated their activism. Teachers, when they illuminated “issues that we were overlooking,” inspired participants to be activists and protest for the “others that do not have a voice or are afraid to have a voice due the fact that they might be deported or put in jail.” An 18-year-old Pacific Islander female described that she attended a protest to increase teacher pay because she realized, “that my teachers have worked harder than they should be and have low received pay.”

In addition to educators, the classroom content helped stimulate millennial activism. Participants cited course assignments as effectively promoting activism. For example, an 18-year-old Filipino female illustrated that her most recent essay in college, “focused on activism then [1960s] versus today. So, I think that made me even more interested in protests and activism.” Content such as documentaries helped spur participant activism. A 27-year-old mixed race female recounted that in a class they watched *Super-Size Me* and, “I remember watching that documentary and thinking ‘wow, this is terrible, I gotta boycott McDonald’s,’ and sure enough, I did boycott McDonald’s.”

Theme 4: Encounters with Activism

The data revealed that activism breeds activism. In fact, when asked if NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protests were responsible for their activism, a 32-year-old Filipino woman responded, “I would definitely say so.” A 26-year-old white female participant explicated that hearing about protests from so many activist-minded people in college, “I guess inspired me to want to speak out.” Similarly, a female participant rationalized that a group of employees at her work, from a separate department, were protesting for better wages and the sight of them protesting led her to stand with them in solidarity. Millennials cited their introduction to activist movements such as Occupy, airport protests over immigration, Black Lives Matter, and the Women’s March as inspiring a broad and continued dedication to activism.

Activism not only inspired millennial activists, but it also inspired their continued participation. Participants reported a series of factors from their first activist event, such as the feeling of solidarity, inspired their continued activism. One Women’s March participant described, “there was a lot of unity ... It just felt so together ... It felt like a safe space ... we knew everyone was there for a common purpose.” In addition to solidarity, participants felt that it was a liberating process. A Black Lives Matter attendee recalled, “So I walk out and I automatically feel liberated because all I see is strong brothers, strong sisters out there standing for a cause.” Another described the experience as “life-changing.”

In addition to the activist events, participants cited living in a community that privileges and respects protest as the origin of their activism. A 23-year-old Mexican-American female clarified that “protest is a huge part of the community” and as a result it seemed like a natural part of their life. Likewise, a mixed race 17-year-old female recounted that “my high school organized a walk-out after Trump got elected to protest, not really to protest, but to walk out for peace, unity and love and about three high schools participated and we ended up getting a turnout of about a thousand people.”

In addition to experiencing contemporary activism, participants reported that knowledge of historical activism engendered their activism. Participants cited cultural activist heroes from history as triggering to their activism. A 27-year-old black man explained, “The heroes that I grew up watching, from Paul Robeson to Malcolm X to Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, Dr. Cornell West, local city council members. Those are some of the people who motivated me to want to protest.” Similarly, a 22-year-old Latinx man remarked, “Hearing about a lot of previous activists, a lot of people in history. One of them for me is Henry Wallace, during the 1940s.” In addition to in-person activism and stories of historical activism, participants cited media and popular culture as a major factor driving their activism.

Theme 5: Media and Popular Culture

Many participants cited news stories and research on the Internet as shaping their attitudes toward activism. A 22-year-old Latinx male recalled that information on the Internet played a pivotal role in her activism, “After my service in the Army, I started to become more aware of our policies and what the party I supported was really all about” on the Internet. A 30-year-old African-American male participant recapped, “I became extremely interested [in activism] after the trial in the death of Trayvon Martin.” In addition to news media content, several participants argued that the images and videos of victims of police brutality propelled their interest in activism.

Documentaries were one of the most recurring types of digital content that participants cited for inspiring their activism. They credited the classroom, websites, and streaming services such as Netflix, for introducing them to activism-inspiring documentaries such as *Super-Size Me*, *Muhammad Ali*, *13th Amendment*, *Requiem for the American Dream*, *Zeitgeist* and Oliver Stone’s *Untold History of America* as inspiring their activism. When discussing these documentaries, a 23-year-old mixed race male called them “educational resources,” before noting that “there are all these really great educational resources and I feel that educating people and ‘awakening’ them to what’s going on.”

Participants found social media as a center piece of their activism. Participants noted that social media makes them aware of social problems that precipitate to activism because it “encourages people to sort of speak out what they believe in.” A 26-year-old female argued that “social media really brought a lot of protests to light.” Some participants argued that they make a difference with these digital tools through debate, with friends, or like-minded communities. A 27-year-old white male noted, “I do a lot of online arguing and online debates which are sometimes fun.” A 26-year-old white male explained, “I think social media is so great because you can really put things on, like, a broader platform.” A 29-year-old female, who lives abroad during some of the year, depends on social media as a way to participate in activism while overseas. There was little opposition to social media, except for a 26-year-old white female who warned that “people are no longer connected to the world. They are only connected to their phones. Social media, it’s annoying.”

Conclusion

The findings complement much of the existing literature on the origin of millennial activism. The participants revealed that the content they discovered online sparked their activism. That content tended to originate from on-the-ground activism, such as online videos of marches or rallies. This seems to add qualitative data confirmation to Fuchs (2017) theory that social media augments, but does not cause, activist movements as other scholars have claimed (Castells, 2013; Jenkins, 2008; Paulin, Ferguson, Jost, Fallu, & Schattke, 2014). The critical role education played in fostering participants’ activism complemented the work of scholars who argued that effective civics education engenders students’ civic engagement (Metzger, Erete, Barton, Desler, & Lewis, 2015). Furthermore, the relationship between participants’ experiences with hate and harm and activism went beyond the studies of racism (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016; Livingston et al., 2017) to illuminate other forms of hate and harm that stimulate activism. Lastly, the findings are suggestive of the scholarship that argues millennial activism originates from exposure to activism (Fahs & Swank, 2011) and parents who offer care and compassion (Kimball, et al., 2016).

Recommendations

The findings are useful to educators seeking to develop effective civic engagement and student activism pedagogies. To effectively teach civics, I propose the implementation and further research on classrooms that incorporate the five progenitors of millennial activism: (1) relationships with family and friends; (2) negative experiences (harm and hate); (3) exposure to activism; (4) structures of institutions and organizations; and (5) the consumption and use of popular culture and media. I have five recommendations for educators seeking to incorporate the progenitors of millennial activism into their pedagogy. (1) Educators can implement effective civics pedagogy through assignments that require students to learn about their loved ones’ lives and experience with activism such as interviews or ancestry projects. (2) In order to draw students’ attention to hate and harm in society, educators must introduce and analyze actual stories of hate and harm in society such as victims of racism and sexual assault survivor stories. (3) The course work should provide space for the exploration of communal issues such as media content of activism;

guest speakers; service-learning assignments; and field trips. (4) Educators can work with students and administration to ensure that their school not only appreciates activism but provides space in the real and imagined sense for students to explore the issues they cherish such as gathering spaces and campus time slots to discuss pertinent issues. (5) Finally, educators must introduce, and allow students to introduce, popular culture and media that they find inspiring. A critical analysis will strengthen their understanding and resolve for the potential and limits of activism through media.

Further research needs to be performed on the factors that stifle millennial activism. Scholars need to determine if there are millennials who experienced the themes found in the data but did not engage in activism. This research could illuminate for educators and schools the experiences that stifle activism. Such findings could be valuable for creating an environment more conducive for civic engagement. Similarly, long term studies need to be conducted to determine if activism is a continuous activity for millennials or is there an age or event that prevents their activism. This will provide an understanding about the longevity of the origins of millennial activism. Lastly, the majority of participants, although diverse in identity, had lived or been born in California. This study should be replicated elsewhere in the nation to determine if the results reflect California millennials or national trends.

The March for Our Lives and other millennial activist movements illustrate millennials' commitment to using activism as a means for influencing policy. The data revealed that contrary to techno-determinist narratives, millennial activism is rooted in experiences much deeper than the usage of digital tools and technologies. In 2020, millennials will comprise the largest portion of the voting bloc (Fry, 2018). Given their size, portion of the voting bloc, and activist proclivities, 2020 will certainly be year where millennials' behavior will define the generation. Educators seeking to increase national levels of civic engagement must look beyond digital tools to the themes found in this study.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

- 1) What was the first protests you attended?
 - a. Have there been many others?
- 2) What issues are you most passionate about?
- 3) On average, how much time a week would you say you spend on activism and protests?
 - a. Provide some examples of what you do?
- 4) When did you become interested in activism and protests?
- 5) Who or what would you say is responsible for your interest in activism and protests?
- 6) Why do you think people do not engage in protest and activism?
- 7) Are you religious?
- 8) How would you describe your upbringing?
- 9) Did you experience hardship or tragedy in your life?
 - a. Do you mind sharing what those were?
- 10) What are some of your interests and hobbies?
- 11) Are you attending college?
 - a. (IF YES) What is your major?
- 12) How old are you?
- 13) How do you define yourself racially or ethnically?
- 14) What is your sexual preference?
- 15) How do you define yourself in terms of gender?
- 16) That is all I have. Do you have anything else you would like to add about your history taking part in protests, activism, or resistance?

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