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A Qualitative Investigation of Civic Engagement and Well-Being among Non-College-Bound Young Adults

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Abstract: Young adulthood is an important developmental milestone during which individuals could greatly benefit from health promotion tools. Civic engagement has been linked with positive mental health and well-being; however, little is known about civic behavior among young adults who do not attend college. We investigated the relationship between civic engagement and well-being among non-college-bound young adults (NCYAs). Investigators conducted semi-structured focus groups and interviews with 14 young adults (aged 18–25 years old) who were not enrolled in college. Using qualitative thematic analysis procedures, coders defined five key themes within the data pertaining to the intersection of civic engagement and mental health: (1) experiencing, witnessing, and believing in the fruits of civic engagement labor; (2) managing emotions and conflict; (3) balancing individual needs with those of the collective; (4) garnering social connectedness and support; and (5) acting in alignment with values. Participants described complex, bidirectional relationships between civic engagement and well-being. Participants experiencing empowerment and political efficacy resulting from their civic engagement experiences reported greater well-being. Some participants used civic engagement as a strategy to cope with distressing emotions, while others were civically disengaged to avoid conflict and negative affect. Participants described the need to attend to personal needs first before engaging in actions to help the collective. Connecting with others was a notable promoter of well-being among those who were civically active, although negative peer influence was also a notable detractor. Finally, participants described strong value systems and identities related to civic engagement. Civic engagement can elicit both positive and negative emotional, psychological, and social well-being. The results underscore potential mechanisms that mediate the civic engagement to well-being pathway, which can be used to inform efforts to engage and retain NCYAs in civic engagement. Interventionists should cultivate strong coping and conflict management skills among engagers to manage difficult emotions that arise before, during, and after civic activity if health outcomes are to be achieved.

Keywords: civic engagement; community engagement; young adults; well-being; mental health; health promotion; social class



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1. Introduction

Young adulthood is considered an important developmental milestone during which emotional, psychological, and civic identity formulation occurs [1–3]. This is a critical time-frame when individuals explore healthy and high-risk behaviors that can dictate patterns of behavior for years to come [2,4]. However, this period can be fraught with challenges as individuals transition from childhood into adulthood [5]. Serious psychological distress

among young adults ages 18–25 increased 71% from 2008 to 2017 [6]. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, data from June 2020 show that 18–24-year-olds in the United States were more likely to report mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and increased substance use, compared to other adults [7]. At a time when individuals are engaging with (or disengaging from) behaviors in ways that will continue to shape their adult lives, this population could greatly benefit from additional health promotion strategies.

The transition to adulthood is increasingly diverse, with no one pathway dictating the sequence of events from adolescence to adulthood. This is especially true when considering how experiences such as college enrollment can shape the trajectory of an individual's well-being. In 2021, data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that 30% of 18–24 year-olds were enrolled in a four-year college, 8% were enrolled in a two-year college, and 62% were not enrolled in college [8]. While disparities in college enrollment across racial/ethnic groups have reduced considerably as of 2023, socioeconomic status still remains a significant predictor of college enrollment: about 89% of students from high-income families go to college compared to 64% of students from middle-class families, and 51% of students from low-income families [9]. Regarding four-year college enrollment, students in the top 40% are more likely to attend than those in the bottom 60% [9]. Evidence suggests that college students report greater substance use and sleep problems than non-students, although non-students are at greater risk for experiencing a decline in health-promoting behaviors from adolescence to young adulthood [10]. Further, young adults with lower income and lower educational attainment are at heightened risk of experiencing mental health challenges [11,12]. It is critical to examine mental health needs among non-college-bound young adults (NCYAs), especially since this sub-group comprises more than 60% of the young adult population coupled with research documenting educational attainment as a social determinant of health [13].

To address the growing mental health needs of young adults, policymakers, researchers, and clinicians have examined the merits of civic engagement as a health promotion tool [14]. Civic engagement is conceptualized broadly as “individual and collective actions taken to identify and address issues of public concern” [15]. Civic behaviors typically fall within three categories: civic (e.g., improving the local community through volunteerism), electoral (e.g., canvassing, voting), and sociopolitical or activism (e.g., marching, petitioning) [16–18]. More recently, a fourth category called online engagement has emerged to capture online activities such as posting on social media about a political or social issue [19]. In young adults, civic types of engagement are often associated with positive well-being, electoral and activism types have demonstrated inconsistent relationships with well-being, and online engagement is still understudied in this field [20]. Individual well-being aside, all four types are important for the functioning of democracies and communities [3,21,22]. However, access to civic opportunities and education is inequitable and prior research has described a “civic opportunity gap” based on socioeconomic status and educational opportunity [3,23]. People with lower levels of education are less likely to civically engage compared to those with higher educational attainment [23]. This may be in part due to college becoming a centralized institution for establishing and maintaining civic engagement among young adults, while few counterparts exist for those not enrolled in college [3]. Young adults with no college education may face more challenges with civic engagement, including living in communities with less civic infrastructure, lower financial security, and fewer resources available [24]. Furthermore, there can be skepticism about the political process and the ability to create meaningful change, which can create a negative feedback cycle where politicians do not engage with those who are less inclined to vote [24].

Non-college-bound young adults (NCYAs) are less likely to engage in civic activity [25,26] and more likely to demonstrate mental health needs [11,27] than college-bound young adults—but less is known about how their engagement or disengagement relates to mental illness and well-being. As conceptualized by Westerhof and Keyes [28], mental illness and mental health form a two-continua model. While mental illness is defined by the presence of specific symptom clusters (e.g., anxiety or depressive disorder), mental health is

broken down into three components: happiness and life satisfaction (emotional well-being), positive individual functioning including self-realization (psychological well-being), and positive social functioning and valuing one's role in society (social well-being) [28]. The literature on civic engagement and individual well-being is inconsistent, especially for people with a lower socioeconomic status. Prior studies have shown that civic engagement may be perceived as an extra burden [29] and that it can take an emotional toll [30], depending on the type and context of the civic experience [31]. While volunteering is generally associated with well-being, electoral engagement and activism have demonstrated more mixed relationships with well-being [20,32]. For example, planting trees as part of a community beautification project might elicit positive well-being, while engaging in a protest that involves negative police interaction or counterprotests might invoke negative well-being. Furthermore, civic engagement requires time, money, and resources that many people do not have or cannot expend [33].

Conversely, research has shown that civic engagement may bolster resiliency and empowerment among historically marginalized groups [20,34]. In a national survey of 5860 LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) youth from racially diverse backgrounds, Fine and colleagues concluded that activism is a “a racialized and gendered response to injustice” [35]. In a study of 43 Youth of Color aged 14–24 participating in youth organizing with community organizations in Brooklyn, New York, youth reported increased hopefulness and self-efficacy to change harmful systems of oppression [36]. However, they also reported feeling a strain between support received from their community organization and their personal reality [36]. These findings suggest that NCYAs might achieve greater well-being by dismantling systems responsible for driving mental health inequities, but there are challenges that come with facing systems of oppression. Given that NCYAs are more likely to be from lower-income households, more research is needed among NCYAs holding different social identities (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation) that interact with systems of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, heterosexism) in unique ways. The field would benefit from additional research investigating how civic engagement operates specifically among NCYAs from diverse backgrounds.

There are many complexities that shape the civic to well-being pathway and findings have been inconsistent; as a result, a qualitative approach is necessary to fully explore these complexities. The field will greatly benefit from qualitative study among NCYAs for two main reasons. First, given civic-related current events including Black Lives Matter protests, COVID-19 public health mandates, and increasingly contentious political discourse in the United States, timely information regarding civic behavior among NCYAs is needed. Amidst this unique landscape of civic events, it is important to elucidate the mental health-related mechanisms motivating or deterring NCYAs from civic engagement to inform future interventional work. Second, while prior research has predominantly sampled older adults, adolescents, and young adult college students, there is a dearth of information examining relationships between civic engagement and well-being among NCYAs [37]. NCYAs could greatly benefit from additional coping tools, especially at a time when young adults are reporting exacerbations in mental illness [7]. More research is needed to clarify the benefits and burdens of civic engagement as a health promoter in this population. Here, we seek to address the following questions through a qualitative methodology in a sample of non-college-bound young adults:

- Is civic engagement/disengagement linked to well-being for NCYAs?
- What factors contribute to the relationship between civic engagement and well-being among NCYAs?

Conceptual Frameworks

This work was guided by several frameworks for bolstering well-being among young adults. Scholars from the liberation psychology field have highlighted the need for communal approaches to mental healthcare, including civic engagement [38]. As Jones and colleagues [39] advocate among communities of color, mental health approaches must cen-

ter resistance to dismantle harmful systems of oppression, rather than resilience for living within harmful systems. This work leverages critical consciousness, the theory of how those from marginalized groups learn to critically analyze and change social conditions responsible for their marginalization [40,41]. Critical consciousness is composed of three processes: critical reflection, motivation, and action [41]. Critical consciousness requires analysis and rejection of inequitable social conditions, perceived political efficacy to change unjust conditions, and then engagement at the individual or collective level to undo such conditions [41]. Given that NCYAs are more likely to be from low-income households, this population may particularly benefit from a critical consciousness lens through which to undo unjust systems that perpetuate health disparities based upon education and income [8,9]. However, with critical consciousness and resistance come exposure to systems that may inhibit well-being, particularly when civic experiences are disempowering, discriminatory, or even dangerous [42]. In their review exploring youth activism as one tenet of civic engagement, Ballard and Ozer [32] developed a model of five pathways through which activism is related to mental health: stress and coping, empowerment, purpose and identity, social capital and connection to others, and systemic change. The model highlights how these pathways can both promote and hinder mental health among youth and young adults (e.g., feeling empowered through activism while simultaneously feeling stressed about social conditions). Using critical consciousness as the underlying theory and Ballard and Ozer's model of mechanisms, the current study aimed to explicate nuances of the civic engagement to well-being pathway among NCYAs as an understudied population.

As an exploratory aim, this work also investigated how closely relationships between civic engagement and well-being align with current evidence-based practices for treating mental health conditions. Civic engagement may be consistent with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and other third-wave therapies (acceptance and commitment therapy, ACT; dialectical behavior therapy, DBT). CBT is a therapeutic approach that helps individuals draw connections between maladaptive thinking patterns, emotions, and behaviors [43]. By identifying and reflecting upon issues of public concern, a civic-engagement-based intervention could help participants shift negative thought patterns about the self toward helping others in their community [44]. Furthermore, addressing issues of public concern can be viewed as a type of behavioral activation by fostering increased engagement in meaningful activity and facilitating social connectedness among individuals [45]. Civic engagement may also be consistent with acceptance-based strategies that encourage individuals to engage in value-based actions, even in the presence of barriers (e.g., emotional, logistical, or environmental barriers) [46]. For example, someone who values social justice may find fulfillment from participating in a civil rights advocacy group. Additionally, civic engagement has been referenced as a coping strategy to help those from minoritized backgrounds regulate distressing emotions, consistent with emotion regulation principles [47,48]. Given the dearth of information in this space, the current study intended to lay the foundation for future studies to better investigate whether civic engagement behaviors map onto these evidence-based treatments.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedure and Sample

Participants were recruited to participate in online focus groups through social media platforms including Craigslist, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. Focus groups are warranted when the research questions call for dynamic group discussion to stimulate a range of opinions and experiences. Given the literature demonstrating both positive and negative consequences of civic engagement for well-being, the study team wished to investigate these concepts in a focus group format to elicit information on all the ways in which civic engagement can be both beneficial and burdensome. Given the sample population, the investigators also wished to let participants respond and engage with each other to elicit a broad range of differing opinions. Individuals responding to the focus group request for participation were screened for eligibility using the following criteria: aged 18–25,

never attended a four-year college/university (and did not plan to attend within the year), resided in the US, able to attend a one-hour focus group, willing to discuss issues related to civic engagement and mental health in a group setting, and willing to be audio recorded. Individuals who met the inclusion criteria consented over the phone and were emailed a copy of the consent form. Individuals also completed a short demographic questionnaire at the time of consent. The primary researcher conducted focus groups and interviews using audio conferencing virtual technology and recorded each session for transcription. All sessions took place in May–June 2020, notably when COVID-19 transmission rates were high, amidst multiple Black Lives Matter protests, and during a US presidential election year. These conditions would lead one to expect that if anything, we would find higher than normal civic engagement on the one hand (Black Lives Matter protests and US presidential election year) but possibly lower participation on the other (COVID-19). As a result of these competing factors, we think the data are likely not unduly influenced by any of these conditions. Participants were compensated with a USD 20 e-gift card. All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB#1566405-4). Participants provided informed consent orally affirming their voluntary participation and use of their de-identified, aggregated data for scientific purposes.

A total of 85 individuals responded to the request for participation, 21 individuals met inclusion criteria, and 14 chose to participate. The primary researcher held three focus groups and two individual interviews for the 14 participants (Group 1, $n = 7$; Group 2, $n = 2$; Group 3, $n = 3$; Individual 1, $n = 1$; Individual 2, $n = 1$). Every attempt was made to schedule focus groups conducive to everyone's availability while still maintaining groups balanced in size. However, participants were living across the US, in multiple time zones, with varying schedules and obligations. As a result, individuals who were not able to make focus group sessions were offered individual interviews. Further, focus groups were still conducted even when others scheduled to participate did not attend to ease the participant burden of having to reschedule. While unanticipated, we believe that the smaller focus groups and individual interviews added considerable quality to the overall study, as participants were very candid and able to discuss their unique experiences in depth. Focus groups and interviews were conducted until the content reached saturation.

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old ($M = 21.86$, $SD = 2.41$). Four participants (29%) identified as Hispanic/Latino/a, four (29%) as white, two (14%) as Black/African-American, two (14%) as Asian, and one (7%) as multi-racial. Gender was evenly split between men and women ($n = 7$ for each) and no one self-identified as non-binary. Eleven participants (79%) reported holding a high school diploma, two (14%) held a GED, and one (7%) had completed 11 years of schooling and had no diploma. Occupations varied, with 11 participants reporting employment in roles like administrative assistance and restaurant service, and three reporting they were not currently unemployed, with one reporting they received disability benefits. Yearly household income (including parental income, in some instances) ranged from USD 8400 to 100,000 (median = USD 37,500). Participants reported living in nine states: Arizona, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, and Rhode Island.

Focus Group Questions. The researchers created a question guide consisting of introductory questions, transition questions, and key questions. The first author served as the interviewer. We followed the guide flexibly and allowed participants to elaborate when necessary. Broadly, we asked participants to describe their definition of civic activity, what activities they currently participate in, why they choose to engage or not, challenges they face that hinder engagement, and perceived relationships between their level of engagement (or disengagement) and well-being. As the authors conducted this study in the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were instructed to respond based on their levels of civic engagement within the past year to encompass both pandemic and pre-pandemic activity.

2.2. Data Analysis

The researchers followed qualitative thematic analysis guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke [49]. Two undergraduate research assistants (AA and EM) were responsible for transcribing each audio recording into a written transcript, and the first author (NF) reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. All six researchers developed an a priori thematic coding scheme based upon the specific aims of this research project and initial notes gathered after every session, informed by conceptual frameworks for mental health among NCYAs. Once an agreement was reached on initial codes, the first author and research assistants coded the first transcript independently and then convened to compare their coding. The researchers reconciled any differences in coding until a consensus was reached. The first author and assistant AA then independently performed line-by-line coding for the four remaining transcripts using Atlas.ti 9 software. The research team then read the content from codes in aggregate to create coding summaries of main concepts within each code. The first author and research assistant then iteratively developed, refined, and collapsed coding summaries to develop themes and discussed all discrepancies to reach a final consensus. One of the aims of the current study was to examine whether mechanisms (e.g., civic self-efficacy, meaning in life) linking civic engagement to well-being in models used among other populations would be applicable to this NCYA population. Thus, the researchers used a deductive approach in theme development, consulting with prior literature [49]. To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym within the transcripts, and the results are reported using this pseudonym (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Geographic Location
Marion	Woman	Hispanic/Latina	New England
John	Man	White	New England
Anna	Woman	White	Midwest
Andy	Man	White	New England
Alison	Woman	White	Midwest
Roger	Man	Multi-racial	Southwest
Laura	Woman	Black/African-American	Southwest
Pedro	Man	Hispanic/Latino	Pacific
Mina	Woman	Asian	Northeast
Vince	Man	Hispanic/Latino	Midwest
Miles	Man	White	Southwest
Nadia	Woman	Hispanic/Latina	Midwest
Patty	Woman	Asian	Northeast
Don	Man	Black/African-American	New England

3. Results

The coders defined five key themes from the data: (1) experiencing, witnessing, and believing in the fruits of civic engagement labor; (2) managing emotions and conflict; (3) balancing individual needs with those of the collective; (4) garnering social connectedness and support; and (5) acting in alignment with values (Table 2).

Table 2. Five key themes derived from the data.

Theme	Illustrating Quotes
Experiencing, witnessing, and believing in the fruits of civic engagement labor	<p>Roger: You know, you get personal satisfaction out of it. Sometimes you get, you know, direct change in your community. It's really nice when you put something in place and you get, you get like a community center. You know, advocate for that community center, and then you get to go to that community center.</p> <p>Nadia: I think it really depends on what the outcome of the situation was. Did I feel like people are educated? Did I feel like people were doing something? Did I feel like my time benefited something? And if the answer is yes, then I feel like I'm in a better mood.</p>
Managing emotions and conflict	<p>Miles: Whenever you're happy and feel in a good mood, you are willing to go and talk to people. But sometimes maybe, like, you are in the bad mood, but you have to go do something and kinda, like, change your opinion of what is happening. Cause, like, you see you are helping other people, you're making people feel better, so maybe it can help you feel better too.</p> <p>Don: You know, I'm a pretty calm guy and that's something that really gets people emotional, so I kind of just try to stay away from that type of stuff with others, because for some reason that gets them really fired up, and, um, yeah. I don't really like to be around, like, really, a lot of like (pause). That's something that gets people really fired up, and I'm a guy who could, like, keep my opinions to myself. So, like, when I do discuss it, I just try not to, how can I say it? Be too forthcoming, you know?</p>
Balancing individual needs with those of the collective	<p>Anna: I just know that being—when we have drives, they're for long hours, and um, obviously at night or on the weekend. Obviously I work, so I'm not, like, rushing over there right when I finish work to go volunteer. It's just, like, odd times and hard to find time for myself sometimes. . . I work a lot and have a social life so, kind of, it's not my top priority.</p> <p>Marion: I am sure this is kind of, ahh, a selfish answer, but honestly? If I make more money. Inequality is increasing every year, the poor keep getting poorer, and the rich keep getting richer, and everybody is trying to think of, like, how to get ahead now. And, like, if that were less of a prevalent thought in my mind, I think I would definitely like to just be able to, like, spend some time volunteering and instead of thinking about how to make more money.</p>
Garnering social connectedness and support	<p>John: I like it because I could speak for animals that can't speak for themselves, and I get to cuddle with kittens all day which is a plus, and, um, get to be around people who are like-minded and have the same, um, values as I do. So I get to have more of a social experience and, um, yeah.</p> <p>Mina: It's a problem. Umm, I think that humans do need interaction and community, and the only, the only time that I hear about community something, uh, doing something for the neighbors is either during the holiday or when they are there helping the elderly or the sick because we have a lot of elderly in my building. So even if I tried, it's like nobody wants to participate, you know what I am saying.</p>
Acting in alignment with values	<p>Vince: Okay, so for me, like, I think that pretty much everything that I do is, like, self motivated. It's, it's really something that I just do. Yea because, like, I believe that it's the right thing to do. It's, it's just a pretty much, like, a moral kinda aspect behind it that, like, I'm going to try to do the right thing, you know. Umm, and hopefully be a good example to impact people, that we can kinda improve the community that way, just one person at a time.</p> <p>Don: I'm just—when you stop worrying about the whole world and stuff, and stop, um, really kinda just putting your main focus into one of change, it really becomes something that's not important to you, you know? Like you kind of, like, leave it.</p>

3.1. Theme 1: Experiencing, Witnessing, and Believing in the Fruits of Civic Engagement Labor

Individuals reported positive well-being from civic engagement when they felt like they had experienced or created meaningful change in their communities. When asked why they chose to engage, participants commented on reaping tangible and emotional benefits as a result of witnessing positive change in their communities:

Roger: You know, you get personal satisfaction out of it. Sometimes you get, you know, direct change in your community. It's really nice when you put something in place and you get, you get like a community center. You know, advocate for that community center, and then you get to go to that community center.

Interviewer: Mhm. Yeah, so personal satisfaction as well as, like, satisfaction of having something for the community. Alright.

Roger: Yeah satisfaction and outcome is cool.

Roger's comments reflect how he derived both personal satisfaction from his work advocating for a community center coupled with the tangible benefit of being able to enjoy the outcome of his work, the center itself. His responses also suggest the interplay between personal satisfaction and the outcome—that achieving the desired outcome can lead to satisfaction.

Andy: Yeah, just, uh, I get, um, I feel very rewarded, uh, like self-rewarded, uh, from volunteering. Um, you know, I remember like at [redacted], like a lot of the women there, uh, came up and hugged me afterwards. Yeah, it's just, it's just a nice feeling.

Interviewer: Wow.

Andy: I didn't get, I didn't get paid for it, or any. I don't get paid for any of the volunteering, but, um, yeah. I just, I just find it rewarding to uh, to give back, um, to the less fortunate.

Alison: I agree with Andy. Um, I think, just seeing people, and, kind of, seeing how it kind of changes their life, and makes them happier. It just makes me feel really good.*

Anna: This is Anna, and I volunteer, um, because it directly helps people.*

These participant experiences highlight how witnessing the direct effects of their volunteerism on others then fostered emotional well-being (happiness, satisfaction) as well as social well-being (feeling valued by society). These responses align with the current literature on civic efficacy and empowerment as crucial to both promoting engagement in civic behavior alongside well-being derived from civic engagement. Civic self-efficacy can be described as the confidence in one's ability to make significant contributions to the community [50]. In close connection, empowerment is defined as an individual's ability to exert control and influence over their own lives, communities, and institutions [51]. Perceived levels of civic efficacy and empowerment comprise the second component of critical consciousness, critical motivation. Participant responses highlight the reciprocal relationship between critical motivation and action: when critical action yields a desirable outcome, this may create a positive feedback loop wherein critical motivation increases. Participants described high self-efficacy to civically engage and high empowerment to create change:

Roger: It's Roger speaking, and, uh, absolutely. I would love to be more involved. Um, I think just the more involved you are, the more you can change, the more people you get to interact with. It's always really cool to hear people's different perspectives, especially as you go up that ladder of involvement. Um, I guess just the ability to change.*

Interviewer: So the more involved you feel, the more you feel like you can make some change?

Roger: Absolutely. 100%.

Interviewer: Cool.

Andy: This is Andy, and uh, yes, I, uh, I completely agree. You know, the more I can volunteer, the more I can give, you know, the more I can help my, uh, community. You know, in [redacted] you have, uh, some very rich and some very poor, um, and um, going into some of these shelters and, um, some of the neighborhoods that need, like, you know, Habitat for Humanity, um, you can see the impact.*

Patty also expressed a similar sentiment: "I think it's just to see the happiness on their faces, it makes me feel happy inside." In other words, doing good for others led to feeling good for the self. Of note, participants reported personal rewards like satisfaction and happiness when they received immediate gratification from their civic experiences. When they were able to see the impact of their work and feel like agents of change, positive emotional well-being resulted.

However, participants noted several conditions under which their civic engagement led to reduced well-being, namely, when they did not feel efficacious or empowered:

Nadia: I went to a protest and the organizers of the protest agreed to end at the same time the cops asked us to end, and I was kinda like, 'What's the point of going against the police if you're just gonna listen to the police?' So I was like, 'Why did I just spend five hours here if the organizers are completely missing the point?'

Nadia's response suggests she felt unable to exert an influence within the community, which subsequently led to her feeling ineffective and like she had wasted her time. Nadia and Miles continued

Nadia: If I went into, like, if I went to volunteer for 8 hours and, instead of volunteering I sat there for most of the time, because no one could tell me what to do, which has happened before. Then I'm sitting there, and I'm not really feeling good about my time. I feel like I wasted my time, and, like, that would make me upset. Umm but as long as my being engaging benefits someone, was I able to do something and participate, then I feel like, then I feel good about it.

Miles: Yeah I agree. I find, like, often times, umm it can be really stressful trying to, like, go to community events. So like, yeah you don't think that it will be organized, and then the whole time you stood there, you get there, you do not know what to do, you have to keep asking people, like you're doing work that you find out isn't necessarily, that like other people could have easily been doing. And like I, I completely understand with uh, community work is, like, sometimes you could just feel like you weren't really successful.

Nadia: I think it really depends on what the outcome of the situation was. Did I feel like people are educated? Did I feel like people were doing something? Did I feel like my time benefited something? And if the answer is yes, then I feel like I'm in a better mood.

Nadia's and Miles's responses clearly link civic self-efficacy and empowerment (i.e., critical motivation) to mood. When civic experiences were organized and they felt like they were able to create change, they connected these experiences with better mood. When civic experiences were disorganized and they were unable to attain the desired outcome, they connected these experiences with low mood. Indeed, participants associated immediate feedback and feeling empowered with positive well-being, and this was most especially true for volunteer civic experiences. This is crucial, as other forms of civic engagement such as electoral types (e.g., voting, canvassing) and activism (e.g., calling an elected official, protesting) are often associated with processes that occur over time with a specific outcome (e.g., electing a representative or passing/blocking legislation). If the results of one's efforts are not immediately known, then it is possible that engagers may experience a delayed sense of well-being. When the results finally do arrive, they may not be welcomed (e.g., the candidate you voted for did not win the election), and this would likely result in reduced well-being. Of course, the ultimate goal of civic engagement is to improve conditions within communities. And, change is not an immediate process. This has clinical implications for practitioners to think about emphasizing the process of civic engagement as opposed to the end results. This is consistent with acceptance-based frameworks that encourage engagement in continuous, value-based activity (e.g., calling local representatives) even in the presence of barriers (e.g., a legislative bill does not pass). This approach may be especially beneficial among NCYAs already experiencing marginalization, and hence, potentially more susceptible to declines in critical motivation when critical action does not produce satisfactory results. In order to bolster critical motivation while sustaining critical action, an acceptance-based approach combined with reinforcing empowerment may be useful among NCYAs.

Several participants described feeling disempowered, particularly with voting behavior, and were less inclined to vote in the future due to limited perceived benefits:

Mina: At the same time, you know, cause like New York is a democratic state. So if I'm—I'm democratic—so it, it all, no matter what I do or if I vote or not, I feel that this is

gonna (pause). The democratic vote will be very strong in New York, so it doesn't matter. So for me, I don't think it matters whether I vote or not.

This was a common thread among participants regarding the political process: many expressed doubts that voting leads to meaningful change. Vince commented:

Vince: I mean I do want to vote because I do, like, wanna use my vote for, you know, at least make a tiny little push in the right direction of things. But umm at the same time, I don't know, I guess—I guess I see more value in, like, the things that I do myself I guess. And so, like, just giving a vote to somebody that may or may not be doing things that I believe in doesn't really seem as urgent as, like, the things I can be doing myself.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah. So that's, I appreciate you saying that. So it sounds like, umm, you see more value in seeing, like, the outcomes of the things that you are able to do yourself versus, umm, unclear of what, like, the candidate may or may not do.

Vince: Yeah, yeah. I just, I just don't really know if my vote is gonna do anything, but I do know that, like, I can do things myself.

Here, Vince is emphasizing his ability to create change by engaging in actions at the individual level as opposed to electoral processes at the systems level. For Vince, this included recycling and other pro-environmental actions that were important to him. His comments highlight the social well-being benefits derived from specific civic experiences that empower him to create change and exert power in his life and community.

Don's responses also showcase low perceived efficacy in the power of voting:

Don: I mean, whoever becomes President doesn't affect me. That's just how I see it. I've still got to be me, and I've still got to work through my life, you know? I've been on this planet 24 years. All the presidents I can remember are George Bush, Barack Obama, and now Donald Trump, and the same thing.

Don noted that throughout his lifetime, he has witnessed Presidents hold office from both political parties, and yet, he has not seen or felt any notable changes in his life. As Don's critical motivation declined, so did his action. These responses highlight processes of low political external efficacy, or one's belief that the government is responsive to citizen demands [52]. Responses also reflect low levels of empowerment to influence change within institutions and among governmental leaders. Given that the respondents were all NCYAs of predominantly lower SES, this is consistent with prior literature documenting the negative feedback cycle in which politicians do not engage with those less inclined to vote, and those who do not feel heard or solicited for feedback are less likely to engage in the political process [24]. It is also noteworthy that the NCYAs most vocal about low political efficacy and low empowerment from electoral processes identified as people of color. While this study's sample size limits our ability to draw further conclusions about political efficacy and empowerment across racial/ethnic groups, the results underscore the importance of investigating how political efficacy and empowerment impact mental health outcomes specifically for NCYAs of color.

3.2. Theme 2: Managing Emotions and Conflict

Many participants described performing civic engagement as a coping strategy to regulate their emotions. For example, Patty discussed remaining dedicated to her volunteer position delivering meals to unhoused individuals once per month because she knew that her volunteerism would ultimately lift her mood:

Interviewer: Do you ever think about days when maybe your mood might impact your decision to, say, go deliver meals to the homeless once a month, or not so much?

Patty: So no matter how I'm feeling, I should still go. So even that once a month, that time that I do go, even if I go in feeling stressed, I know I'm gonna walk out feeling good again.

Interviewer: Okay, huh, that's interesting. So even if you're feeling stressed or whatever it may be, you're still gonna walk out feeling good again.

Patty: Yeah because I think it just takes your mind off of it. You focus, you shift your focus on something else completely different.

Patty's volunteering experience is consistent with cognitive behavioral therapy interventions that aim to shift maladaptive thinking patterns about the self and others toward having a globally better view of the communities in which we live. Miles echoed this sentiment when discussing his civic engagement at community events serving kids or senior citizens:

Miles: I don't know, it just feels good. Like, like I feel like sometimes you don't want to go at first, and then whenever you get there, you're like, 'Wow this feels really good, I'm happy that I went.' It could be rewarding.

Like Patty, Miles's comments suggest that his volunteer experiences are very rewarding and produce emotional well-being, even if he initially did not wish to engage. Volunteerism can also be conceptualized as a type of behavioral activation, or engaging in pleasant or meaningful activities to increase mood. Miles continued:

Miles: Whenever you're happy and feel in a good mood, you are willing to go and talk to people. But sometimes maybe, like, you are in the bad mood, but you have to go do something and kinda, like, change your opinion of what is happening. Cause, like, you see you are helping other people, you're making people feel better, so maybe it can help you feel better too.

Laura and Marion expressed similar sentiments:

Laura: Umm I think, like, helping others could help your, help yourself. Like, when you're not doing the best in life and you're kinda sad and blue, like, helping others can kind get you through it as well.

Marion: I was going to say something similar. Umm I mean, of course it is circumstantial, but depending on your situation, umm, helping others can be really comforting even if your problem is not resolved.

These experiences are consistent with acceptance-based therapies that encourage engagement in activities even in the presence of barriers. For Miles, Laura, and Marion, their comments demonstrate an ability to pursue civic opportunities even in the presence of emotional barriers like low mood and sadness. Their comments are also consistent with distress tolerance strategies used within dialectical behavior therapy, which encourages individuals to use techniques like distraction to step away momentarily from high-stress situations. In addition to utilizing civic engagement to regulate stress and mood, Nadia described how both negative (e.g., fear, anger) and positive (e.g., joy, alertness) affective states can precipitate civic engagement:

Nadia: I feel like anger is a huge desire to be motivated. If I see something that just makes me so angry, I want to make a change and try to do my best right from there. At the same time, extreme joy. When you see things that are good, you kinda want to hop on while the wheels are turning.

Nadia's comments position activism as a strategy to manage difficult emotions, such as anger. While experiencing positive affective states like joy may increase the likelihood of participating in activism, Nadia's responses highlight how negative affect might also yield motivation for activism. Prior research has demonstrated that sociopolitical stress is related to negative emotions and reduced well-being, but negative emotions were also then associated with greater motivation to take political action (e.g., volunteer, protest) [53]. Nadia's comments are consistent with this research in which she describes using anger as a motivator for activism, and activism as a coping strategy to cope with her anger. From a critical consciousness perspective, this showcases the importance of critical reflection

skills whereby NCYAs are able to cognitively appraise social conditions causing them distress, and then formulate an action plan to effectively cope with that distress. Participant responses reflect how individuals might civically engage to generate greater positive emotion or to cope with negative affect.

Participants also discussed how they purposefully did not civically engage to avoid experiencing poor well-being, negative affect, or conflict with others. Marion reflected:

Marion: I was thinking that a lot of it can also be very emotionally heavy. Like, I know a couple of people who've wanted to volunteer for, like, call centers, myself included. And then you go to orientation and, like, memorize this whole manuscript of, like, how we do things, why we do them. Like, this is more responsibility than my actual job!

Marion noted that she chose to engage in actions like shopping locally, as this type of civic engagement fit into her daily life without causing additional stress. Pedro and Mina also spoke to their desire to avoid additional stress in their lives that they felt civic engagement would yield:

Pedro: I see people who get involved, they seem pretty mad, angry, and I don't want that. I think ignorance is bliss. I just wanna stay that way. I just wanna focus on vibing, getting money.

Mina: I agree with that. Like umm, it might affect you emotionally and mentally, umm, if you get too involved in a, in a, you know, in different various subjects or topics, situations. It, it's the stress. It could be, it could be, a very big toll, take a very big toll on you.

Interviewer: Yeah

Mina: And, you know, maybe sometimes you may not realize it but you are stressing over yourself, ahh you know, an issue that it's not directly involve, doesn't directly involve you, but you're, you kinda feel involved because you either know the person, or know the topic, or the people involved in the, in the issue.

Interviewer: Mhmm, yeah okay.

Mina: And, and sometimes you take it too personal.

Interviewer: Yeah, what do you mean by that? You said, like, take it too personal.

Mina: Umm you make it, you, you start to turn the other person's issues into your, your own problem. Bringing them into your own life, and bringing you stress. And you're bringing it, ahh, and whatever your vibe you're giving off is affecting your whole well-being and the people, people close to you as well.

Mina's comments reflect the emotional toll that volunteerism can produce if boundaries are blurred between helping an individual versus internalizing the problems of another individual as one's own. Further, Mina illustrates how this stress impacts not just herself, but other loved ones as well. Mina's comments indicate that teaching healthy coping skills, including stress management and appropriate boundary setting, may be beneficial among civic engagers and those thinking of civically engaging.

Pedro's comment above also reflects his desire to avoid experiencing negative affect, namely anger; because he has witnessed how civic engagement can elicit anger among engagers, he does not wish to civically engage. Pedro continued, discussing the duality between wishing to be more knowledgeable about current events while balancing the stress that comes with that knowledge:

Pedro: One of the negatives of not being involved is I don't know the bad things that are going on. But at the same time, as long as I don't know, I can't stress about it. I don't have to worry about it.

Here, knowledge is directly correlated with stress while ignorance is associated with bliss. According to critical consciousness theory, knowledge is conceptualized as empowering. However, for Pedro, knowledge (i.e., critical reflection) is perceived as burdensome. This is an important consideration for NCYAs who may be living in communities without

adequate resources to address societal inequities. Moving from critical reflection to critical motivation, or increasing one's efficacy to interact with civic systems, may help. Yet, reflection and motivation cannot stand alone, and policymakers, practitioners, and researchers must provide tangible resources to NCYAs so that they feel adequately equipped to manage civic issues.

In addition to disengaging from civic life in order to avoid distress, NCYAs highlighted fear of conflict as a predominant barrier to civic engagement. When asked about whether he discusses social issues with family or friends, Don commented

Don: You know, I'm a pretty calm guy and that's something that really gets people emotional, so I kind of just try to stay away from that type of stuff with others, because for some reason that gets them really fired up, and, um, yeah. I don't really like to be around, like, really, a lot of like (pause). That's something that gets people really fired up, and I'm a guy who could, like, keep my opinions to myself. So, like, when I do discuss it, I just try not to, how can I say it? Be too forthcoming, you know? This, um, yeah yeah.

Interviewer: Sure. Yeah. Yeah. So it sounds like, um, when you do try to have these conversations with folks, then like, it can get people fired up or maybe they get upset. And so for that reason, you feel like you just kinda would rather—I'm sorry, go ahead.

Don: I think the other thing for me is I'm pretty stoic. Do you know what stoic means?

Interviewer: Uh huh.

Don: Yeah I'm a pretty stoic person so it really doesn't, like, matter. But um, yeah. It's like, you know. If it comes up I can give my opinion, but I'm not gonna go too deep into it. I'm not gonna get too riled up, it's not really an emotional thing for me.

Don's comments reflect his willingness to share his opinion when others raise social issues as a topic of conversation, but he does not raise these topics on his own for fear of upsetting others. Don went on to describe his history of picketing and protesting at ages 17 and 18. However, after failing to witness any change, he decided to stop his activism in order to protect his mental health. Don described disengaging to avoid conflict with others and to achieve a sense of calm within himself:

Don: Like, once you take yourself out of the argument, you just put yourself in like the middle point. You become very observant. You know? You just become very observant, and you just kind of watch the circus. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah. That's a good way of describing it. So you, sort of, you feel like you become more objective, kind of, you're able to take yourself out of it. Yeah. What do you think, like, what do you think that does for your mental health?

Don: Haha, that's a good question. It's great for your mental health because it takes, like, the aggression out of you and brings the calm. You know?

Don's activism experiences had yielded low political efficacy coupled with high conflict, resulting in poor well-being. For these reasons, he no longer wished to engage in activism.

Like Don, Patty reported discomfort engaging in politics due to concerns about experiencing conflict:

Patty: I don't really plan to speak out on my political beliefs to the public and this is why: I feel like if I don't say what they want to hear, then they're going to really attack me, like, 'No, you're completely wrong. You should not be feeling this way, so your political beliefs should be like this.'

Patty recalled an experience in high school when a political discussion became highly conflictual and uncomfortable for her:

Patty: I remember we were in high school, my friend and I, and she was a really big Hillary Clinton fan, and this was when Bernie Sanders was running and so a lot of people were really big Bernie fans. And she was like, 'OMG, Bernie Sanders is so bad,' and I

could tell she was getting really angry and her voice was getting louder, and like, people were looking at her. So I just took out my phone and was like, 'Oh my god, look at this newspaper article'—I think it was just a random movie with an actor. And I really just tried to sway myself from that type of conversation, and I just don't want people around me to feel uncomfortable as well.

Patty's comments highlight how she refrains from voicing her political beliefs to avoid experiencing anger from peers. Her experience with a friend in high school also demonstrates her use of distraction to both curb anger among peers and manage discomfort within herself. Patty and Don's experiences illustrate how NCYAs are simultaneously trying to manage their own emotions while also navigating and responding to the emotional experiences of others. This was particularly true when discussing political issues (Patty's discourse regarding elections) and social issues (Pedro and Don's statements regarding social issues). These findings are consistent with prior research showing mixed relationships between electoral engagement and activism with mental health. These responses underscore the need to help NCYAs navigate difficult spaces and conversations, particularly pertaining to political and social issues. In addition to regulating their own emotions, findings suggest that learning interpersonal skills to communicate and set boundaries with others could be useful among NCYAs who will inevitably face continued, difficult conversations in their lives.

3.3. Theme 3: Balancing Individual Needs with Those of the Collective

Most participants described a strong desire to civically engage. However, many noted the importance of attending to their individual needs and circumstances before performing civic engagement to help others. For example, participants described competing obligations in their personal, work, and social lives that took priority over civic engagement. Laura commented on how her responsibilities as a mother inhibited her ability to civically engage:

Laura: I haven't really done anything with my community because I have two toddlers, so I'm like, really busy.

Anna, Miles, and Nadia further discussed feeling limited in their capacity for civic engagement due to work and social responsibilities:

Anna: I just know that being—when we have drives, they're for long hours, and um, obviously at night or on the weekend. Obviously I work, so I'm not, like, rushing over there right when I finish work to go volunteer. It's just, like, odd times and hard to find time for myself sometimes. . . I work a lot and have a social life so, kind of, it's not my top priority.

Miles: I would say I would be more involved, umm just, I don't know, whenever I can, like, go and do stuff. But umm, just sometimes with work, like, it's like when you are not working, you think, like, I don't want to go and do something else.

Nadia: I would say like my biggest struggle would be, umm, my workplace and my job. Um, I typically work like 60 hours a week, um, so sometimes I just find myself tired, or drained. Or even if I'm so busy at the office, I'm almost, like, misinformed. Because I had ten days or ten hours, where I couldn't even tell what's going on because I was so busy at work.

In addition to time constraints, Anna's and Miles's responses suggest feeling tired or drained from work so that when they did have free time, they lacked the physical or emotional energy to partake in civic acts. Further, Nadia's comment highlights how her work hours have both interfered with her emotional capacity to perform civic acts while also detracting from her ability to stay civically informed. These responses serve as an important reminder that critical reflection, motivation, and action are processes requiring time and energy. For many NCYAs juggling multiple responsibilities, perhaps the most actionable form of resistance they can take is to rest. Scholar Tricia Hersey posits that rest can be a powerful tool among those holding marginalized identities by resisting capitalistic

“grind culture”, which fuels the white supremacist ideal of productivity as the cornerstone of success [54]. Given that NCYAs are more likely to be from low-income communities, Hersey’s message is an important one for NCYAs. Among those facing marginalization, resting to resist systems that ask for more while providing less may be a form of critical action in its own right.

Participants described the importance of balancing their desire to civically engage while honoring their personal limitations. In reference to his volunteer position at an animal shelter, John reflected:

John: I would say I want to volunteer more, um, but I think it’s a little bit stressful. Um, I don’t want to overwhelm myself too much so I take, like, the smallest shift I can. And I might work my way up into walking dogs and things like that, but at the moment, I’m just a shelter assistant.

Marion seconded this sentiment, noting

Marion: Some, like, volunteer work and some social engagement can be pretty emotionally intensive, umm, or even just, like, time consuming to the point where, like, you could even burn out coupled with your other engagements and responsibilities. So back to what John said, like, knowing your limit is good.*

Among individuals feeling stretched thin across multiple domains, mental health providers will often relay the following message: “You can’t pour from an empty cup”. NCYA responses reflect an imperative to fill their cups first before pouring into the cups of others; civic engagement may be perceived as an additional stressor amidst multiple other competing demands. As Marion said, “knowing your limit is good”, and the frequency of civic engagement may differ across individuals and time periods, depending on specific life circumstances and other obligations occurring simultaneously.

Other participants noted the interaction between job-related obligations and financial instability. In response to a fellow NCYA describing their experience of walking by a protest, Pedro shared:

Pedro: I can’t just take a day off of work and not get paid to do some protest.

Pedro later shared that he voted in the 2020 primary election, as his company gave him paid time off to do so. Regarding donating, he noted:

Pedro: People in my neighborhood or my city don’t have much to give.

Pedro’s experiences reflect that different types of civic engagement may be more or less readily accessible to NCYAs. Receiving paid time off for activities like voting was much more feasible for Pedro than engaging in other civic acts (protesting, donating) that would have required additional time, and time away from paid employment. Vince and Marion also commented on their desire to feel more financially stable before civically engaging:

Vince: I’ve got, you know, like, a willingness to, like, do more in the future. I got, you know, like, different kinds of charitable causes that I would like to be giving to, but just my current financial situation doesn’t really give me much of a chance to.

For many individuals, especially NCYAs who may be in lower income brackets due to lower educational attainment, donating money may not be financially viable. When the interviewer asked participants what would make them more civically engaged, Marion stated:

Marion: I am sure this is kind of, ahh, a selfish answer, but honestly? If I make more money. Inequality is increasing every year, the poor keep getting poorer, and the rich keep getting richer, and everybody is trying to think of, like, how to get ahead now. And, like, if that were less of a prevalent thought in my mind, I think I would definitely like to just be able to, like, spend some time volunteering and instead of thinking about how to make more money.

Participants perceived time spent performing paid labor in opposition to their ability to civically engage. Responses suggest that NCYAs dedicate significant time and mental efforts toward achieving financial stability, as may be expected for young adults newer to the workforce. While other populations have described similar barriers including lack of time and resources [33], NCYAs may be even more resource-limited given the ways in which age (e.g., child rearing, familial responsibilities) and educational attainment (e.g., lower-paying jobs) interact.

3.4. Theme 4: Garnering Social Connectedness and Support

Participants described civic engagement as an opportunity for social connection, which cultivated positive well-being. In reference to volunteering at an animal shelter, John commented:

John: I like it because I could speak for animals that can't speak for themselves, and I get to cuddle with kittens all day which is a plus, and, um, get to be around people who are like-minded and have the same, um, values as I do. So I get to have more of a social experience and, um, yeah.

For John, he appreciated social interaction with animals as well as people with similar interests and value systems for preventing animal cruelty. Marion also noted that she utilized civic engagement to make social connections:

Marion: I moved to [redacted] from [redacted] less than a year ago. So for me, it's at least, like, getting to know the community better and meeting people, and just having it be more of a social outlet. . . I definitely think, generally speaking, it has a positive impact. To reiterate what others have said, it's rewarding. Umm it reinforces, like, the values of the community. It definitely helps your social skills and just being social in general, umm, which is great for just, like, mental stability and being around people.

Here, Marion clearly links her civic engagement to improved social skills and connectedness, which then yields psychological and social well-being. Particularly for Marion who moved cities during the COVID-19 pandemic, civic engagement was a method to feel included within her new community and to bolster her mental health amidst a difficult time period globally and personally for her. While she had previously noted pitfalls of civic engagement like stress and emotional burden, her comment above suggests that “generally” the social benefits derived from civic engagement have a positive impact on well-being through social connection. Laura agreed with John and Marion:

Laura: I think it makes you, like, more socially active with your community. And you know, you meet more people, you learn a lot of new things that you wouldn't on an everyday basis, so I think it has a very positive impact.

As a mother of two toddlers, Laura was forthcoming that she did not have much time to civically engage. However, when she was able, she valued civic engagement as both a way to achieve social connection as well as a learning opportunity by interacting with others with different lived experiences.

NCYAs also discussed the role of their peer and community groups as promoters of civic engagement. Several participants reported having supportive friend groups who were also civically engaged, which motivated their own levels of engagement:

Nadia: I feel like for the most part, I have friends who are very engaged. I have friends who run fundraisers online selling things. I have photographers going out and documenting. Umm I have other friends organizing zoom calls to create discussions. I have a friend starting a book club. Umm like, I feel like, umm, everyone that I'm close with is really trying to use their own personal resources to do something better. . . I would sit there and listen to my friends talk about these things, and I was like, 'Yeah I should be doing these things. I should be better. I should be active. I should be, like, going out and making a better community.'

Nadia described her peer group as very civically active, more so than other participants. In turn, Nadia described her own participation in numerous types of civic engagement, including protests and organized social and political movements. Nadia's peer group heavily influenced her level of critical consciousness. She reported high critical motivation to create change within her community, and she expressed feeling supported by her friends across her multiple civic actions. Miles agreed with Nadia:

Miles: Yeah I agree. I feel like peer pressure plays, like, a really big part on you wanting to do stuff. It's like, if all your other friends are doing it, then they are making more friends doing it. You kinda thinking, like, 'Crap that sounds fun. Like, I wanna go out and do that too.' So I think peer pressure is, like, our big motivator.

For Miles, his statement reflects a notable “fear of missing out” on social activity common among young adults. He viewed civic engagement as both an opportunity to meet new friends and also an opportunity to engage in activities with current friends. Patty also noted how pressure from peer groups prompted her desire to become more civically knowledgeable:

Patty: Um, well I think when I went to high school, like, my classmates around me, they were very, um, they felt very strongly about their political beliefs. And then it would kind of sometimes create arguments, like, before or after classes, and I feel like people would base their opinions around, like, 'Oh, if your ideologies are different than mine then we can't be friends.' So it just kind of made me more aware, and then I just really wanted to get to know more about, like, both sides, per se, and just like what makes this side different from the other.

For Patty, peer influence prompted her to engage in the critical reflection process so that she could contribute to conversations happening among her peers. While Patty had previously noted spending significant efforts avoiding conflict and managing emotional responses to social discourse among peers, her response above suggests that these difficult discourses ultimately raised her awareness of social issues to help her form her own opinions. Patty's narrative highlights how critical consciousness may produce discomfort among engagers as they contemplate complex social conditions and differing opinions regarding those social conditions. Yet, her response also showcases that discomfort is often a necessary aspect of change, and so it is imperative that policymakers, clinicians, and researchers appropriately support NCYAs at every stage of the critical consciousness process.

While participants described situations in which (1) civic engagement yielded greater social connectedness and (2) social support motivated more civic engagement, they also described situations in which they faced a lack of support and even social antagonism of civic engagement. Mina shared:

Mina: A lot of people, especially in my neighborhood—I was in a middle class of neighborhood—umm, they been keeping to themselves for a long time. And a lot of people shy away from wanting to get to know neighbors, especially my neighbors. I feel, I feel like people are living and more comfortable with being away from people, and having kinda that social interaction and contact with other people.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah.

Mina: It's a problem. Umm, I think that humans do need interaction and community, and the only, the only time that I hear about community something, uh, doing something for the neighbors is either during the holiday or when they are there helping the elderly or the sick because we have a lot of elderly in my building. So even if I tried, it's like nobody wants to participate, you know what I am saying.

Interviewer: Hmm yeah, I appreciate you sharing. So it sounds like, umm, even if you try, that your neighbors and your community—you don't necessarily feel supported by them sort of jumping in and doing things too.

Mina: Yes, that's correct.

Mina's comments demonstrate how feeling disconnected from her community lowered her critical motivation and made her less inclined to civically engage. While this interview was conducted during COVID-19 at a time when social connection was low nationally and globally, Mina shared that these dynamics within her community had existed for the past ten years. Her comments also indicate that even if she were to do something for her community, her efforts may not necessarily be appreciated. This aligns with theme one, showcasing how social support for civic engagement can either bolster or inhibit civic self-efficacy.

Vince also shared how a lack of social support made him feel badly about his civic engagement, which sometimes reduced his desire to continue his environmental actions:

Vince: A lot of people don't, don't believe in the certain things that I do, and that's why they don't do the things. And they—and it's not just like 'I don't want to do that.' It's like, 'Oh, you are just not smart for doing that,' you know?

Interviewer: Hmm right. So it's not just like a passive, like, 'Oh I don't believe in doing this,' but it sounds like they are, sort of, actively putting you down.

Vince: Yeah so that's the only thing that, like, that's the only negative type of thing, like, as far as my emotional state. That's the only time, like, what I'm doing is kinda a negative thing, you know. But it's not really because of what I am doing, it's just because of how other people are maybe critical of it.

Vince was able to acknowledge that his pro-environmentalism was still a positive experience for him; however, the judgement he received from peers negatively affected his emotional state. Vince had previously commented how he felt a sense of efficacy for performing environmental civic acts, so perhaps this civic self-efficacy bolstered his emotional well-being even in the presence of antagonistic peers that might have reduced his social well-being. Vince's comments also suggest that he is utilizing strong critical reflection skills to weigh negative repercussions from peers against an issue that he believes is important and values-consistent. Broadly, NCYA comments reflect the importance of social connection in promoting well-being derived from civic engagement, while underscoring how limited social support and social antagonism can negatively alter the civic engagement to well-being pathway.

3.5. Theme 5: Acting in Alignment with Values

Participants described civic engagement as a part of their value system. Nadia, Miles, and Vince described civic engagement as synonymous with what it means to be a good citizen and the way in which they try to treat others:

Nadia: Umm, I just do them because I think it's the right thing to be doing, umm, seeing other people and just to create a better place for other people, and myself, and my friends and my family. It's really just the, like, most you can do is be there for them. And if it means showing up to protest, or if it means donating through a cause, like, you should be there for the people you care about.

Interviewer: Yea, thanks Nadia. So, right. Showing, showing up for the people that you care about.*

Vince: Okay, so for me, like, I think that pretty much everything that I do is, like, self motivated. It's, it's really something that I just do. Yea because, like, I believe that it's the right thing to do. It's, it's just a pretty much, like, a moral kinda aspect behind it that, like, I'm going to try to do the right thing, you know. Umm, and hopefully be a good example to impact people, that we can kinda improve the community that way, just one person at a time.

Nadia's and Vince's comments reflect the deep extent to which they consider civic engagement a guiding force in their lives, with Nadia stating, "You should be there for the

people you care about”, and Vince asserting, “I believe that it’s the right thing to do”. Nadia’s comments also showcase how she perceives civic engagement to have positive residual effects for herself, her family, and her community, embodying the notion of doing good for others to do good for the self. Vince, meanwhile, perceives civic engagement as a moral imperative to improve the community, describing it as “something that I just do”.

Other NCYAs described civic engagement in alignment with their value of self-improvement. In addition to valuing the enjoyment derived from civic engagement (“I think stuff like this is pretty fun”), Miles discussed the value he places on learning about himself and others:

Miles: Yeah I agree, and for the most part, like, I think stuff like this is pretty fun. Like when you go to it, you can have a good time doing, like, civic engagement or, like, community activities. Whether you’re helping kids or senior citizens or something, like, you learn a lot about yourself and other people. So I think that life’s good.

Anna and Alison echoed this sentiment:

Anna: I would love to volunteer and get more involved in the community because I feel like it makes me a better person, and it makes my community a better place.

Alison: I think it definitely made me a more selfless person and just, like, more caring and, kinda, compassionate towards others.

Participants reflected upon the different types of experiences and people they have encountered through civic engagement, and how ultimately those experiences facilitated personal growth and psychological well-being (learning about the self, becoming a better person). In this manner, critical action facilitates additional critical reflection, whereby participants not only examine societal inequities but also their role in undoing those inequities. Alison’s statement reflects how her civic experiences are important action steps toward acting in alignment with her values of selflessness, care, and compassion. Similarly, Roger discussed finding a sense of meaning and purpose from civic engagement, which ultimately “saved” his mental health:

Roger: I was just sitting in my house all day, and then I found a volunteer canvassing job, and it just finally got me active. And then through there I guess I finally found a career, out of nothing. So yeah, it partly financially saved me and motivationally saved me.

For Roger, civic engagement was critical to improving his mental health by getting him out of his house and giving him purpose in life. He described starting volunteer work canvassing for a politician, which then developed into a paid position working on campaigns. Values such as personal growth and mental health are important considerations, particularly for NCYAs at the peak of their identity development.

Civic engagement was also noted as an area for personal growth among children. While only one NCYA in the current sample reported being a parent, this parent described civic engagement as a critical facilitator of values she would like to pass on to her children:

Laura: As my kids get older, I would like to get more involved so they can learn values and grow up with a good example, helping others and stuff like that.

While Laura previously noted childcare as a barrier to civic engagement given the young age of her toddlers, her children may become facilitators of civic engagement as they grow and are more able to participate. She noted wishing to be a good role model for her kids and perceived civic engagement as one way to imbue important values, like helping others, to her kids.

In contrast to the above examples, Don noted how civic engagement was “just not my purpose in life”. Don continued:

Don: I’m just—when you stop worrying about the whole world and stuff, and stop, um, really kinda just putting your main focus into one of change, it really becomes something that’s not important to you, you know? Like you kind of, like, leave it.

Don did not find civic engagement to be particularly meaningful and thought the best way he could help the world was by focusing internally on his own life and career path. Pedro shared this viewpoint, engaging in voting behavior when he received paid time off, but otherwise valuing financial stability and his emotional health—best achieved by NOT civically engaging. These are important considerations in a group that might already be feeling overburdened. Sometimes civic engagement will not align with an individual's value system, or it will not be prioritized as highly as other values. As previously stated, rest can be a powerful form of resistance among marginalized groups to protect emotional and financial well-being. Among NCYAs who are ambivalent about starting or continuing civic engagement, interventionists might consider connecting NCYAs with activities most in alignment with their values (e.g., women's rights, environmentalism, food insecurity, racial equity) while helping NCYAs derive meaning from their experiences to increase well-being.

4. Discussion

The current study captures unique information about civic engagement in the lives of young adults who had not pursued a college education. In a population with the highest rates of mental illness [11,12] and yet the lowest rates of civic engagement [25,26], this research illuminates important factors to consider for interventionists (e.g., clinicians, researchers, and policymakers) when thinking about civic engagement as an individual and community health behavior. Specifically, this study elucidated important factors that may alter the civic engagement to well-being pathway among NCYAs, including (1) experiencing, witnessing, and believing in the fruits of civic engagement labor; (2) managing emotions and conflict; (3) balancing individual needs with those of the collective; (4) garnering social connectedness and support; and (5) acting in alignment with values.

Consistent with prior literature among young adults, theme one demonstrated that high civic self-efficacy and high empowerment derived from civic engagement yielded greater well-being [32,55,56]. NCYAs described deriving emotional, psychological, and social well-being as a result of being able to see real change through their civic engagement. These findings replicate previous critical consciousness work showcasing the benefits of empowerment derived from analyzing and dismantling systems of oppression. Indeed, NCYAs positioned critical motivation as an essential mechanism mediating the civic engagement to well-being pathway. Findings highlight how certain types of civic engagement may be more or less likely to yield empowerment and civic self-efficacy. For example, most respondents described feeling good about their volunteer experiences, except when the volunteer experience was disorganized. In contrast, there was much more variability in reported levels of civic self-efficacy and empowerment for electoral and activism types of engagement. Specifically, several NCYAs reported low political external efficacy, or one's belief that the government is responsive to citizen demands, when discussing activist forms of engagement like protesting [52]. Don's experience stands out as a notable example: he consciously took a step back from activism and political participation due to low perceived political external efficacy in his ability to create change, coupled with stress and burnout. This speaks to the grueling work of activism and politics, and how the burden to create change cannot fall to those disproportionately experiencing the effects of a broken system—especially among NCYAs who may be experiencing multiple forms of marginalization across social class, race/ethnicity, gender, etc. NCYAs are more likely to be from lower-resourced communities with fewer civic opportunities [3,9,23]. Given research on how politicians are less likely to engage with those from marginalized communities [24], it is not hard to see how critical motivation would quickly decline among those who feel like their voice will not be heard, or seriously considered even when they do use it. This bears an important distinction from young adults attending college: while civic self-efficacy may be a common mechanism linking civic engagement to well-being, the strength of this pathway may differ significantly across groups. College young adults have access to social clubs, political groups, and civics courses that NCYAs do not. There is greater infrastructure in

college settings, such that low motivation may not hit as hard among college students in a resource-rich environment compared to NCYAs in a resource-limited environment. Given that the civic system is weighted toward those with a college degree, those without a college degree who participate may be more likely to experience defeat or nonresponse. This sends an important message for interventionists that our approaches must be three-fold: we can increase supports and skills at the individual level among NCYAs, yet we also need to see investment and responsiveness at the interpersonal and systemic levels. At the individual level, NCYAs might benefit from increased supports and skill-building for those wishing to civically engage. Interventionists might also encourage NCYAs to focus on the power within their actions despite setbacks while connecting their experiences to values they hold. At the interpersonal and systemic levels, this could look like increased efforts among elected officials to engage with NCYAs and passing legislation to guarantee equitable voter registration procedures. We would do well to equip all members of society with critical consciousness skills to be able to reflect upon how uplifting those most marginalized in society uplifts us all.

Theme two largely replicated prior findings, demonstrating how civic engagement can be used as a coping strategy to manage difficult emotions. Interestingly, both positive and negative affective states served as motivators for civic engagement among NCYAs. While several NCYAs commented that emotions like sadness made it difficult to engage, participants framed civic engagement as a coping tool to help them regulate their mood. From a critical consciousness perspective, participants demonstrated utilizing critical reflection to observe sources of their distress and then creating an action plan to manage that distress. Given that NCYAs experiencing multiple levels of marginalization may be disproportionately impacted by sociopolitical events, critical reflection emerged as one method by which young people determine how critical action might help them regulate distress and negative affect. The findings are also consistent with current evidence-based therapies like cognitive behavioral therapy, which encourages individuals to engage in meaningful or enjoyable activities to uplift mood. However, conflict avoidance was especially pronounced among participants, perhaps because conflict levels within the US were extremely high at the time researchers conducted these interviews in May–June 2020: during a US presidential election year, during critical events within the Black Lives Matter movement, and during a global pandemic prior to vaccine availability. NCYAs like Patty noted high distress in managing conflict among peers when political discussions arose. Many NCYAs identified conflict as a major barrier to civic engagement and source of negative affect. Conflict can be inherent to certain forms of civic engagement and speaks to why civic engagement can be so difficult in addition to the many other barriers NCYAs described. However, civic engagement is crucial to the health of society, and youth civic engagement has been linked to benefits at the communal level [57]. The question becomes not whether NCYAs should civically engage for their individual well-being, but how to best support NCYAs to civically engage in a sustainable and healthy manner so that their voices are heard, and their communities reap the benefits of civic life. This might look like providing civic engagers with the appropriate emotional, tangible, and legal tools to participate effectively. Interventionists should also cultivate strong interpersonal effectiveness skills among NCYAs to help them navigate difficult conversations that will undoubtedly continue throughout their adult lives. It is also noteworthy that participants who most strongly endorsed taking a step back from civic engagement, especially activism, to protect their mental health also identified as NCYAs of color. Given that NCYAs are more likely to be from low-income households, and the way in which income inequity interacts with racial inequity, this speaks to the imperative for those holding positions of privilege to step into this work to undo harmful systems perpetuating inequity.

Participants noted difficulties balancing individual needs with those of the collective. As Miles and Anna illustrated, work and social obligations often superseded their choice to civically engage. Furthermore, NCYAs noted that feeling emotionally or physically drained detracted from their ability to critically reflect upon current events and engage in

meaningful critical action. This pathway aligns with the theme of “self-care and collective care” discussed by Conner and colleagues [42] in their study of activism among college students. Importantly, these two concepts are not mutually exclusive. And, as Conner et al. highlight, the burden falls upon societal leaders and institutions to ensure that individuals are able to meet their basic needs. This theme was particularly notable for NCYAs, given the number of respondents who identified time, money, and resources as major factors that limit their ability to civically engage. Findings are consistent with McBride et al.’s [33] study exploring barriers to civic engagement among low-socioeconomic communities. For NCYAs, financial instability was a significant factor influencing their ability and desire to perform civic engagement. In addition to tangible resources, NCYAs reported having less emotional reserve to civically engage. This information is critical for interventionists to consider before indiscriminately prescribing civic engagement as a health behavior. While this theme of self-care appears within the broader literature on civic engagement among college students, it may be more pronounced among NCYAs who do not have access to a resource-rich environment and supportive services (e.g., dining halls with easily accessible food, fitness centers, counseling centers). When necessary, rest as resistance is also an important message to consider. Especially for NCYAs holding multiple marginalized identities who may be experiencing the intersectional impact of ageism, racism, and classism (among others), protecting mental health through rest can be a form of critical action in its own right [54]. Finally, interventionists should identify ways to make civic engagement less cumbersome and more accessible for those already feeling overburdened.

Within theme four, social connectedness and social support were notable as both mediators between civic engagement and well-being and motivators of civic engagement. NCYAs described actively performing civic engagement to cultivate social connection. Further, NCYAs were more likely to civically engage with the support of their peers and communities. In this manner, greater peer support yielded greater critical motivation, which then resulted in heightened critical action. Other demographic groups have also noted social connectedness as a promoter of civic engagement, as civic experiences create opportunities to strengthen existing social networks or create new ones [45]. This may be an especially salient factor for NCYAs, as civic engagement could create additional social networking opportunities that these young adults would not have garnered from a college setting. In addition to physical structures like dining halls and dormitories that facilitate social connection, colleges often offer voter registration drives, social groups and clubs linking students to political involvement, and coursework directly tied to civic participation. While this theme of social connectedness is notable among both college samples and the current NCYA sample, interventions utilizing civic engagement to bolster social connectedness and mental health would need to account for the unique experiences of NCYAs. Prior literature has cited community-based organizations, service programs, and training programs (e.g., AmeriCorps, Armed Forces) as important civic opportunities for NCYAs [58]. In the current study, NCYAs most commonly reported engagement with community organizations (e.g., Habitat for Humanity), as well as one-time engagement in activities online or in-person (e.g., volunteering opportunities, attending protests). All these forms of critical action, even those more temporary in nature, could facilitate greater access to supportive and economic resources for NCYAs. However, NCYAs like Vince described how lack of support and antagonistic views of his civic engagement prompted negative affect. For Mina, limited community support then limited confidence in her ability to create change that would be noticed or appreciated. Thus, social connection and social support had both positive and negative effects on NCYA critical motivation, and hence, well-being derived from critical action. This is not entirely surprising, given that adolescence and young adulthood is a time when peer groups shape behavior in addition to parental or familial influence [59]. This point is crucial for NCYAs who may live in communities or interact with peer groups who are civically disengaged. Future interventional work employing civic engagement for health promotion might consider

working with politically like-minded peer groups to bolster civic activity at the community level. Future interventions might also promote civic engagement at the community level to simultaneously uplift communal mental health, as has been suggested among liberation psychology scholars calling for greater collective approaches to mental healthcare [38].

Participants described civic engagement as a part of their value system and sense of purpose. Roger's experience was particularly salient, highlighting how his participation in political campaigns yielded values-consistent job opportunities and strengthened his mental health. For Roger and others, critical reflection allowed them to identify their own role in undoing societal inequities, which led to increased personal growth and meaning in life. Conversely, Don described how civic engagement was no longer part of his value system, which he described as essential to protecting his mental health. In both instances, participants demonstrated using critical reflection to ascertain the best course of action for their well-being. According to acceptance and commitment therapy principles, mental wellness is achieved not by symptom reduction but through values attainment [46]. When we are willing to face barriers in the service of things that are important to us, that is how we lead fulfilling lives. Values may be especially important for young adults at the peak of their emotional, psychological, and civic identity development [1,2]. It is crucial for interventionists to give young adults adequate space to reflect upon what matters in life, what they want to stand for, and what actions will best align with those values. For some NCYAs, that may mean facing barriers like conflict or anger in the service of promoting social causes the individual deems valuable. For others, it may mean prioritizing family life or work obligations that are also values-consistent. This was exemplified among NCYAs like Laura and Anna, and may differ from other college-attending young adults who do not share these same obligations. Finally, some NCYAs like Don may choose rest to protect their mental health. Like all interventions, the key is to center each individual and honor their unique needs, experiences, and value systems.

This research has several notable limitations and strengths. As this study was conducted during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is difficult to say whether some of the barriers and activities reported are attributable to pandemic-specific circumstances. The field would benefit from ongoing research in this area to clarify the benefits and burdens of civic engagement that NCYAs experience over time. On the other hand, this study was able to assess civic engagement constructs at a pivotal moment in history with unique opportunities to become active in political and social movements. Scholars have documented how young adults regained a sense of control during the pandemic by helping their communities manage the outbreak [60]. The literature demonstrates that if people are going to civically engage, adolescence into young adulthood is often the time when they will do so, which sets the stage for future civic engagement [59]. Despite the pandemic, or perhaps because of the pandemic, NCYAs reported finding ways to become civically engaged to regulate mood, for social connection, and to feel empowered. However, it is important to note that several participants were disengaged and described their disengagement as a way to preserve their well-being. It is likely that both types of experiences exist among NCYAs. Critical motivation (i.e., civic efficacy, empowerment) emerged as a key factor in shaping the civic engagement to well-being pathway; future studies might explore these dynamics further while investigating how intersecting identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation shape the civic experience. Additional research is warranted within communities known to experience a disproportionate impact from structural oppression (LGBTQ+ populations, communities of color). Furthermore, future research should investigate whether relationships between civic engagement and well-being align with current evidence-based models for mental health treatment, including CBT and third-wave modalities. While the current study highlights ways in which these models might inform future civic engagement-based interventions, these findings are exploratory in nature and should be rigorously tested in future studies.

5. Conclusions

This research provides critical insights for interventionists interested in utilizing civic engagement to bolster mental health and well-being among NCYAs. Participants described both positive and negative links between civic engagement and mental health, as well as important factors like empowerment and social connectedness that may shape the civic experience. Critical motivation, the second component of critical consciousness, was particularly salient among NCYAs. Given that NCYAs are more likely to be from lower-income households and communities with fewer resources, NCYAs may be especially susceptible to reductions in critical motivation. Multi-level approaches are required at the individual, interpersonal, and systemic levels to ensure that critical motivation is bolstered among NCYAs. The results also underscore the benefits of critical reflection in helping NCYAs analyze sources of their distress and then formulate an action plan to best regulate their distress. Interventionists should consider circumstances and barriers unique to each individual before promoting civic behavior broadly as a health promotion tool. And sometimes, rest as resistance may be the most effective form of critical action. The field would also benefit from future work examining the influence of civic engagement on community health and well-being, as prior research has shown significant benefits for the functioning of our society when young people civically engage [57]. Without a doubt, civic engagement is difficult work—and necessary work. Young people deserve to be heard, supported, and resourced as they lay the foundation for the remainder of their civic lives.

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