

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AMONG URBAN ETHNIC MINORITY YOUTH IN THE NORTHEAST UNITED STATES: A REFLECTIVE VIEW ON COMMUNITY SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURES

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Social exclusion occurs as a combination of challenges (e.g., unemployment, high poverty, family conflict) that limits life opportunities. Social exclusion has been researched within European contexts, among middle-class families, and from quantitative perspectives. However, research on the topic among urban ethnic minority youth and using qualitative methodologies has remained elusive in the U.S. Although collaborative efforts between governmental institutions and community-based coalitions have helped develop intervention efforts to decrease social exclusion among youth in low-income urban areas, it continues to develop within families, communities, and societies. Therefore, this research explored experiences of social exclusion among low-income minority youth in an urban community in the Northeast U.S. Data were collected from nine focus groups ($N = 58$). The goal was to explore how urban ethnic minority youth understood social exclusion and the community resources they used to navigate its challenges. Findings included economic and societal exclusion in the form of economic deprivation and lack of appropriate safety nets. Although youth expressed a lack of community connection in the form of community exclusion, they applied a reflective view on how inequality shaped their lives, while discussing pathways towards social inclusion. This reflection was emphasized by the importance of developing bridging and bonding relationships (mentoring).

Keywords: bridging and bonding, ethnic minority youth, mentoring, social exclusion, urban youth

1. Social Exclusion among urban ethnic minority youth in the Northeast United States: A reflective view on community supportive structures

Changing socio-economic circumstances such as low wages (Marimpi & Koning, 2018) and the depletion of safety nets (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF], Cilesiz & Drotos, 2016) have had unfavorable effects on urban ethnic minority youth in the U.S. (Allen et al., 2013). Social exclusion limits socio-economic opportunities and has been linked to intergenerational poverty and barriers towards upward mobility (Bayram et al., 2012). Although new opportunities have been developed, such as programs to encourage employment among youth (Gelber et al., 2014), the risks of social exclusion and marginalization have become significant during recent years.

Social exclusion is understood as a phenomenon where lack of socioeconomic opportunities (e.g., upward mobility) creates diverse challenges for vulnerable families. Social exclusion is a multidimensional concept (e.g., economic, societal, political, cultural), defined as "...the experience of being kept apart from others physically (e.g., social isolation) or emotionally (e.g., being ignored or told one is not wanted)" understood as a type of social rejection characterized by experiences of

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ostracism, discrimination, social isolation, and dehumanization (Riva & Eck, 2016, p. 9). This concept has been widely debated in Europe (Barnes, 2019; SEU, 2004), regarding theory, measurement, and the relationship to schooling, poverty, and unemployment (Littlewood et al., 2017). However, there is a gap in the U.S. literature exploring social exclusion among urban ethnic minority youth and the supportive community structures they need to succeed.

Studies have shown that vulnerable youth (e.g., youth with low educational opportunities, youth living in poverty) are more prone to social exclusion (Pouw & Hodgkinson, 2016). These youth experience various barriers including disparities in education (Allen et al., 2013) and employment, mostly through labor market entry (Vasile & Anghel, 2015). Within the U.S., social exclusion manifests often among African American (Chen et al., 2015) and Latinx youth (Achinstein et al., 2016; Lardier et al., 2020), who are more likely to live in poverty in urban neighborhoods with high levels of violence, as compared to their non-urban and often White counterparts. Despite these vulnerabilities, minority youth value their communities and feel connected to their neighborhoods (Achinstein et al., 2016; Evans, 2007). This may be due to the combination of several factors, such as family support, friends, and positive school environments (Foster et al., 2017). In fact, within urban settings, research has suggested favorable outcomes when family, community centers, and peer connections are interrelated (Henderson et al., 2016). Connectedness and community supportive structures have the potential to combat social exclusion and guide protective interventions for ethnic minority youth (Foster et al., 2017). Unfortunately, research and interventions that explore social exclusion and promote supportive community factors among youth in the U.S are under-studied (Prince Embury & Saklofske, 2014).

Given these limitations, this paper examines how youth understand social exclusion in an under-resourced urban community and more importantly, how they view supportive community structures in the form of bridging and bonding (i.e., form of support focused on the process of connecting youth with support and a technique towards developing positive relationships while focusing on developing positive relationships). To support and extend existing theory and research, we hope to understand: (1) how these youth's critical awareness shaped their experiences of social exclusion; and (2) how these youth recognize resources that may allow them to achieve socio-economic mobility.

2. Literature review and conceptual framing

Social exclusion occurs when individuals and communities suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, low income, poor housing, high crime environments, and family conflict (United Kingdom's Social Exclusion Unit [SEU], 2004). Youth exclusion is characterized by lack of supportive governmental safety nets (Kremer et al., 2015) and dysfunctions within social institutions that contribute toward the barriers faced by low-income minority youth. Studies in the U.S. tend to focus on youth poverty (Machell et al., 2016) and low educational opportunities (Chen et al., 2015) without concentrating on the constellation of social issues that make up social exclusion.

Research has shown that social exclusion negatively influences urban ethnic minority youth (e.g., Latino, African American) in the U.S. Social exclusion leaves these youth vulnerable to economic, social, and public health threats, such as low socioeconomic status (SES; Fahmy, 2006) and substance abuse (Fisher et al., 2017; Lardier et al., 2017). Although exclusion manifests among both low-income rural youth (Gonzales & Ruiz, 2014) and urban ethnic minority youth, the latter group often encounters barriers related to population density and location of services, which may influence low educational performance and attainment (Benner & Wang, 2014) and career development (Allen et al., 2013). Therefore, the scant research on social exclusion in the U.S. is problematic, as social exclusion may manifest differently for youth in the U.S. as opposed to their European counterparts.

2.1. Societal and economic exclusion

Societal exclusion and social exclusion are terms often used interchangeably. In this paper we make the distinction between social exclusion as a macro term that is multidimensional (e.g., economic, political, cultural; Sen, 2000), and *societal* exclusion, which represents barriers towards social safety nets (e.g., subsidies) and insufficient social integration (e.g., discrimination) (Bhalla & Lapeyre, 2016). Examples of the disadvantages that stem from societal exclusion include but are not limited to: (1) waiting lists for public housing; (2) obstacles to health care and education; and (3) barriers to social services such as being denied welfare benefits (Barnes, 2019).

Economic exclusion refers to limited economic participation and opportunities (Renahy et al., 2012). The consequences of economic exclusion for urban ethnic minority youth are often related but not limited to: (1) persistent long-term unemployment; (2) low wages; and (3) job insecurity (Bhalla & Lapeyre, 2016). The consequences of unemployment among urban ethnic minority youth contributes to increased risk of future low wages, decreased qualifications upon entering the labor market, and insufficient or absent institutional and social support (Weil et al., 2017). Social support in the form of safety nets (e.g., government subsidies) and social origins (e.g., family support, community outlets) are particularly important protective factors for unemployed youth (Weil et al., 2017). Moreover, as MacLeod (2018) discussed, the nature of conducting research within low income communities of color means being aware of historical oppression within these communities, which influences current social and economic opportunities.

2.2. How youth understand social inequality

In a U.S. context, more research is needed on how minority youth understand social exclusion and inequality, and how it influences their lives. Critical consciousness describes how oppressed communities experience socioeconomic or racialized forms of domination and marginalization (García Coll et al., 1996) and then learn to critically analyze their social conditions and eventually take action to change them (Diemer & Li, 2011; Freire, 1973). Although there are developmental differences between adolescents and young adults regarding the way critical consciousness is developed, there are studies that consider both populations when developing trustworthy critical consciousness measurements, implying that such a sample can have similar meaning making experiences (Thomas et al., 2014). Critical consciousness has been associated with socially excluded African American youth's mental health and self-efficacy (DiClemente et al., 2018), school engagement (Kelly, 2018) and career development among low SES Puerto Rican youth (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016). Therefore, given these desired outcomes, it is vital to research how marginalized youth understand their social exclusion. Such an opportunity may help youth identify contextual supports and educational practices that facilitate the development of critical consciousness. In addition, encouraging participation in community-oriented and grassroots activities may benefit marginalized youth, as these may provide spaces to develop personal social analysis and constructive social action (Diemer & Li, 2011).

2.3. Bridging and bonding toward social inclusion

Bridging and bonding is defined as both (1) a form of support focused on the process of acting as a connection between youth and gate-keepers, institutional agents, social networks, and organizations; and (2) a technique towards developing positive relationships in regards to way youth are treated (e.g., in a caring manner; Staton-Salazar, 2011). Bridging and bonding provides a way of understanding and thinking about how to mobilize youth toward social inclusion and creating social

connections (Wyer & Schenke, 2016). The goal of bridging and bonding is to produce social change by applying a multidimensional framework, as well as relational processes between organizations, or individuals and organizations. Stanton-Salazar's (2011) bridging and bonding paradigm is applied in this context as a process where closeness and guidance between a mentor and student develops. This relationship becomes a main characteristic that determines positive experiences for youth. Stanton-Salazar (2011) provided a framework through which institutional agents (e.g., mentors who have graduated from summer programs, adults within the organizations who aid in connecting youth to others) can assist youth to enable their authentic development by providing them adequate access to resources and institutional support. Institutional agents occupy one or more positions of authority and therefore can act on behalf of youth. This person can convey and negotiate important resources to youth (e.g., guidance with requirements for admission to higher education institution). Views such as these allow us to look at how youth of color gain access to vital resources by cultivating relationships within institutional settings. The conditions for bonding are reciprocal, as students come to identify with, and conform to, the new reality that they have created with mentors. Having this bonding relationship with mentors becomes a valuable resource in the social and economic struggles that are carried out in different social contexts by urban ethnic minority youth.

Therefore, conceptualizing social exclusion dimensions towards urban ethnic minority youth, while considering bridging and binding relationships, is essential for understanding how youth navigate and make sense of the consequences they face under social exclusion (Saunders, 2015). Youths social exclusion involves the systematic denial of entitlements (e.g., lack of social services) and resources, such as community programs, which poses barriers towards their right to fully participate in economic and societal terms (e.g., social inclusion). As such, two research questions were examined:

RQ 1: How do urban ethnic minority youth understand social exclusion?

RQ2: What factors are used by urban ethnic minority youth to navigate social exclusion?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research setting

This study took place in a midsized under-resourced urban community in the Northeastern U.S. Historically, a hub for manufacturing, this community has experienced like many rustbelt locations, economic disadvantage and White flight, which brought high levels of unemployment and poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), 30% of families live below the poverty line, with a majority-minority population composed of 80% Hispanic/Latin(o) and African Americans. Furthermore, 37% of residents identify as foreign-born citizens, and just under 20% of the population is without health insurance (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

3.2. Sample

As part of a larger Drug-Free Communities (DFC) grant initiative, this study draws on nine focus group with ethnic minority youth. Participants ($N = 59$) represented 15 youth programs from the focal city. Participants were near equally split between males ($n = 49.2\%$) and females ($n = 50.8\%$), which ranged in age between 16 and 27 years ($M = 19.31$; $SD = 2.67$). Youth self-identified as African American/Black (49.2 %) and Hispanic (40.7%), which is reflective of the broader community. Nearly all participants (87%) of youth under 20 years old received free or reduced lunch, and 49.2% identified as currently or previously receiving social services or governmental assistance (e.g., welfare), an indicator that they and/or their family live below the poverty line.

Youth in this sample were from various community-based program throughout the target community. These community-based programs are defined as a space distinct from schools that provides opportunities for learning, socialization, protection, and care (see Baldrige, 2019). For youth still in high school, these programs provided a path toward graduation by providing additional support, or work opportunities. For those that were pushed-out of high school, these programs offered a ‘second-chance’ by providing opportunities and support to complete their General Educational Degree (GED), or find paid employment. Because these programs had similar missions of providing space for learning, socialization, and growth, programs served various age groups in the same location, simultaneously.

3.3. *Data collection*

Members of the research team who were trained in qualitative data collection methods gathered data. Prior to data collection all community programs were given parent consent forms to hand out to potential participants prior to attending focus groups. The focus groups were held at a community college in the focal city. Classrooms were used to conduct these groups, which ensured privacy during data collection. Focus groups contained both male and female participants. In accordance with the IRB, all participants under the age of 18 were required to return a parent/guardian consent form. For those participants that returned a signed parent/guardian consent, facilitators and co-facilitators provided participating students with assent forms before beginning focus group interviews. Participants 18 years of age and older were asked to sign an adult consent form to participate in focus groups. To protect the anonymity of participants, identifying information has been redacted. Participants were asked to fill out a brief fourteen question demographic survey, including questions related to age and educational background.

Focus groups were conducted following a six-question, semi-structured interview guide, which ensured all focus group participants received uniform questions (interview guide found in Appendix). Additionally, it allowed probing for deeper discussion by the focus group leader regarding individual and collective experiences related to the target community and its needs. Focus group questions were directed at understanding youths lived reality, with questions such as: “What does your future mean to you?” and “What resources will help you reach your goals?”. The focus groups ran between 60 and 80 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following the completion of each focus group, the research team debriefed to process the information and discuss data saturation. While debriefing, all members of the team discussed individual experiences towards responses and generalizable patterns across all the focus groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Focus group methodology was chosen because it allows researchers to hear and understand the voices and lived realities of vulnerable groups (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As opposed to one-to-one, face-to-face interviews, taking groups of people offered a way to *listen* and *learn* from the multiple voices of socially excluded youth in a safe environment (Barbour, 2008). The focus groups also helped the researchers connect the voices and stories of participants to previous research. For instance, regarding educational barriers and the much-needed spaces to explore the possibilities of critical consciousness. Although researchers in this study understood that focus group findings would not be generalizable, this methodology was nonetheless applied as an important way to learn how urban ethnic minority youth understood social exclusion and what factors were used to navigate such realities, through hearing their authentic voices.

Focus group facilitators (N = 9) represented the diverse racial and ethnic composition in each group to aid in participants’ comfort and further represent the larger community. One facilitator and co-facilitator identified as Latinas, both with bilingual and transnational backgrounds that included working with vulnerable populations in the Northeast U.S. One female facilitator identified as Black and Nigerian and had a social work background. Two male facilitators and one co-facilitator identified

as White and had ample experience working with disadvantaged youth from the area, serving as leaders of multiple community grant initiatives targeted at socially excluded youth. One female facilitator and co-facilitator identified as White and had been working with the community for several years, mostly delivering youth-oriented programs that addressed violence and drug prevention. There were diverse levels of income among the facilitators. During each focus group, facilitators and co-facilitators were paired to ensure no race was overly represented (e.g., all White or all Hispanic/Latin(o) facilitators).

4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using a fusion process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thematic analysis is an exploration for patterns within a specific set of data and involves the methodical identification of themes through watchful reading and re-reading of transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2014). This preliminary inductive process started with no previous engagement in neither the literature nor the research question (Braun & Clark, 2006). During this phase, the team of two coders independently read through, took notes, and familiarized themselves with the transcribed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this, both researchers developed broad general codes (i.e., neighborhood violence, economic challenges; Saldaña, 2015) from salient discussions from the focus groups, which centered on thoughts and experiences of urban minority youth. Before and through initial revision of data and coding processes, we were able to first understand the multiple dimensions of social exclusion (e.g., economic, societal, communal) and bridging and bonding theories. As such, we were informed by each theory as we identified patterns emergent from the data (Gilgun, 2012). This research then engaged in deductive inquiry; as themes emerged, we informed our deductive understanding through social relevant research and literature. The double approach that accompanied the research process was important, particularly to the deductive thematic analysis, because it allowed us to interpret the themes that directly emerged from the data when the inductive preliminary coding was performed.

Once we had finished identifying broad codes, we moved into categorizing smaller themes within those codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) so that the theoretical model might be developed as thoroughly as possible. For instance, we identified neighborhood violence and drug use, which aligned with experiences of low community connection found in the social exclusion literature (Benner & Wang, 2014). In terms of mapping and naming themes, we mapped themes along the original models and named them in ways that reflected both the model as well as the experiences of the youth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The awareness for potential bias was a constant focus during analysis. We established credibility through analyst triangulation as authors coded separately and met to determine data consensus (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The research team had several meetings and compared data patterns to achieve these interpretive findings. Level of coder agreement ranged between 95-98%, although when contradictions emerged regarding data interpretation, each coder presented evidence from prior research and a variety of theoretical perspectives to make their case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The research team discussed consistency of the findings, including reiteration and solidification of the four global themes, which were reviewed and approved by all members at each phase of this study. Furthermore, all authors have experience in the field of community psychology and ample experience working with vulnerable populations, in particular urban ethnic youth, as the team had “prolonged engagement in the field” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127) and were able to determine if the interpretation of data were trustworthy. An audit trail was also kept over the course of analysis and consisted of notes taken during meetings and coding (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

5. Findings

The main themes identified were: (1) economic exclusion ($n = 9$); (2) societal exclusion ($n = 7$); (3) lack of community connection ($n = 7$); and, (4) the need for bridging and bonding ($n = 9$). Salient themes that emerged beyond social exclusion included a reflection by youth on community supportive structures such as bridging and bonding between peers and mentors in community programs and recognizing available resources in their immediate surroundings.

5.1. *Economic exclusion*

Youth in all focus groups ($n = 9$) recognized economic deprivation as a barrier in their lives. Two consistent examples described by participants included *lack of resources to satisfy basic needs* and *recognizing the importance of economic stability while having unstable incomes*. For example, one youth discussed these two ideas:

We wanna have advantages too (...) it's just crazy because my mom wants to be able to pay for everything, buy us nice stuff but she can't because she has to worry about paying bills.

The quote above exemplifies a situation of economic exclusion and its consequences in the form of stress and anxiety. This youth recognized his mother's stress over wanting to provide basic needs for the family while having to decide what need held the most importance. Similarly, while discussing employment opportunities in the area, one youth shared: "...not having enough [money] really keeps you limited in your options, and not having enough...make you feel like you're a little stuck. Like, I don't have money and I don't have a way to get money or pay for things." Being in an environment with few viable economic options, along with the lack of stable family income, made youth feel "caught" with little hope for the future. Another youth described the challenges of economic exclusion when obtaining resources for school: "It's hard for teens, especially that's in, like, high school (...) Their parents don't make enough to support them (...), like pay for books, tuition all of that,"

Youth often described how economic deprivation had consequences for heads of the family and recognized how parents often lack the appropriate resources to offer them a quality education. Youth were also keenly aware that their community lacked vital resources. At times, they expressed the need for violence and crime in order to provide for themselves and their families. As one youth expressed: "Say these kids are sellin' drugs for money, majority of the time they don't have light, they don't have food, they need help." Another youth stated:

That's all they know, street life, and [youth], they're gonna be like, I wanna do that too. He [dealer] knows how to do it so good. He's been doing it for this long. He makes 3G's a week. He does a good job, so of course they're gonna do it. They lookin' at the money.

These quotes highlight the detrimental impact of economic isolation and segregation of urban youth, as they consider engaging in often unsafe activities in order to have a form of income. As youth explained, being economically excluded also evoked feelings of frustration, likely because of the threat it poses to people's need to develop their own life paths. As one youth stated:

If someone's doing better than me, I kinda get angry, a little bit jealous. I mean, I can congratulate you, but now I'm trying to get where you're at...but I can't do what you do cause I'm not where you at right now.

Responses highlight how economic exclusion influenced the lives of urban ethnic minority youth in multiple ways (e.g., family stress, low personal expectations). Youth recognized structural constraints that were related to low SES because of structural limitations (e.g., lack of quality education), which was often accompanied by stress and anxiety of themselves or family members and made economic advancement difficult. Economic exclusion for urban ethnic youth not only jeopardizes their chances for success, but also threatens the health, stability, and cohesion of their families and communities.

5.2. *Societal exclusion*

Youth in these focus groups reported societal exclusion ($n = 7$) in the form of barriers toward social rights. Youth described that both themselves and their families struggled to apply and receive assistance from social safety nets (e.g., housing). This idea was articulated by one youth who described their understanding of an available safety net program in their community: “They’ll take your housing because you’re doing too many hours at school and work.” Another youth expressed:

If you’re not making less than like a certain amount, then they don’t wanna help you. I just think that’s unfair. I think they should help the people...that’s trying to elevate themselves. I just think they should help them grow.

This type of exclusion from the minimal supports that tend to be available increases vulnerability for youth, their families, and community. Another youth added, while referring to her mother and the use of social subsidies: “My mom, she used to get food stamps like three years ago, she’s not eligible [anymore]. The system is all wrong, because they only wanna help people that’s doing bad. They don’t wanna help the people that’s doing good.” Youth were critical and recognized that public assistance was an outlet; however, there were stipulations that often caused more stress than relief.

To illustrate the consequences of weak safety nets systems, a participant discussed how the lack of accessibility was a determinant for use of resources: “It’s like we got programs, like, we have grants and stuff, like, single mothers, single parents...But they don’t tell us about it, we have to go out and look for it.” Similarly, another youth stated: “So it’s like we need, like, for school for instance, we need grants, we need more grants, we need help.” These quotes convey the idea that the existence of social programs is not promoted in the community, leaving the responsibility on youth and their families, who often do not have appropriate resources to guide them towards these opportunities. In addition, youth recognized that societal exclusion was not common or lived by other families. “People in higher classes have the advantage to do what other, us people in lower classes wanna do.” Another youth further added:

Most of this stuff you don’t be seeing this happen in the White neighborhoods. Like, some, they like their child’s out and they playin’ on the lawn or whatever, and they don’t have to worry about somebody driven by they house and shooting.

Youth described the lack of educational resources, a typical characteristic of societal exclusion, as a barrier to social rights. They recognized the deficiencies within their educational system, forcing them reflect on how unattainable doing well in school was, due to lack of proper resources and opportunities.

Some schools don't have as much materials as, like, when I was in middle school, we use to take books, textbooks home and do our homework. Now we can't do that. Because they don't have enough textbooks or books, nothing!

Here we see how this respondent recognizes the lack of efficient social safety nets and the consequences it brings to their lives, particularly regarding their educational opportunities and professional development. This acknowledgement of having minimal social resources that are neither assisting nor meeting this community's needs was a salient theme throughout the focus groups.

5.3. *Lack of community connection*

Lack of community connection (e.g., community exclusion) was the third theme within focus groups ($n = 7$). Youth perceived the focal community as disconnected and disorganized. When asked, "What does community mean to you", youth responded by characterizing their "block" "street" or "hood." Frequently, community also meant disorganization, which was described because of the violence, drug use and "territorial beef," which left youth fearful of going outside of their homes. One youth expressed anxiety of sitting outside his house because of community violence: "Cuz little kids nowadays are getting killed" while another stated: "...gun violence here, like, people can say the smallest things and could get killed for it." This was further described by a youth:

...you have to sit there and worry about you're sittin' in the house and your kid outside. You have to worry about, 'ok my kid might get shot.' Bullets has no one's name on them, bullets can hit anybody.

Youth expressed the impact and fear of exposure to violence, as they described the reality of living in a high crime and poverty-ridden neighborhood. The description of the constant fear of getting hurt without fault was a cause for tension and anxiety for many youth; given that neighborhood violence brought consequences that affected the whole community. Additionally, youth expressed frustration regarding the prevalence of drug use: "People shootin' up heroin in front of our kids' faces, it's normal!" The exposure to drug use and violence was something understood as part of youth's daily-lived reality. As one respondent described: "You come in [this city] you like, what just happened? Where the parks? Where the green grass?" Youth often reflected on community exclusion and their own personal experiences: "Cuz it's like, you can't really be a kid anymore now, around here, you have to be cluttered up in the house watching news with your mom." Another youth echoed the feeling of hopelessness: "That suicide, it's not fair. Because kids can't be kids anymore." These quotes represent a reflection and awareness of neighborhood conflict, and the possible negative and irreversible outcomes that can emerge because of community exclusion.

As exemplified in these quotes, youth were acutely aware of the challenges generated by the lack of community connections, reflected in the social problems within their own city when compared to surrounding cities. High prevalence of community exclusion left youth isolated within their own streets/blocks and by other communities, leaving youth with a heavy sense of community disconnection. Moreover, youth were also aware of the negative impact this environment generated and how it influenced their lives, mostly by feelings of fear and losing their childhood.

5.4. *The need for bridging and bonding*

Youth's recognition and understanding of economic hardships, barriers towards social rights, and lack of community connection seemed to motivate them to navigate the challenging surroundings.

The need for bridging and bonding was described by youth as strategies to achieve and develop self-efficacy while reflecting on experiences of social exclusion. Youth also described the importance of resources available to them, including communal resources (e.g., career workshops), which acted as form of bridge and bond for social support. Moreover, they recognized the importance of critical thinking to develop self-efficiency, regarding future generations:

Okay, like little kids, right? Like rec centers, they really do need them. Like, you can start them off young...have them do like little community service jobs, like, open their minds to like different opportunities that's out there in the world. Only thing they know is being a basketball player or football players. It's more jobs out there that —the streets, that's all they know.

Despite encountering multiple barriers, youth in this study believed they had power to change their community, their lives, and their families. Bridging and bonding requires reflecting on one's environment (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) and, in this case, youth were encouraged to create and develop paths towards inclusion. Often, these paths were focused on the future, as one youth shared:

We should look at the bright side of our kids. What's their future? Like, what's their gonna be like, we don't want them to be like us. We don't want them to be raised how we was raised, in the hood and doing all of this.

Bridging and Bonding also requires the presence of institutional agents in the form of mentors, which were apparent in many participant lives. One youth described the importance of having guidance: "I think they [youth] should have a mentor from a young age who has been there and been to jail and been down that road." Here we see how the process of achieving personal growth implies not only a recognition of available resources within low-income communities, but also working with mentors with similar life experiences.

Moreover, although youth in this study expressed stress from discrimination, stigma, and exclusion, they felt a sense of agency from the community-based organizations to which they belonged. The social connections within those organizations resonated with them, further increasing the idea of bridging and bonding as a means for personal growth. One respondent stated: "So it's kind of a network of people, right, that not only are in a similar program and situation you're in, but also a network of people that are talking and-and care about one another, that's one way to start." It became apparent that youth understood having positive connections to people and organizations was a key towards achieving a better future.

Community institutions provided a space where youth were able to find diverse outlets to develop their interests (e.g., after school and summer programs), where they connected with other peers and adults. One youth shared:

It's good because, like in our program, we do community service and there's like, community service groups, so say you want to be become a construction worker, they're people who want to do that, they go to construction sites and learn.

These relationships and organizational spaces not only gave youth tools towards agency, but also provided valuable learning skills to apply to their daily lives. One male described his daily words of affirmation from the program he attends: "I believe in the power of positive self-identify. The seven principles upon which I stand are respect, honor, faith, self-determination, resilience, peace and love, and so I'll dedicate myself to working hard and creating my own path to success." Youth in this study perceived the importance of these institutional and personal processes, and they strived to achieve

change, which is the end goal of bridging and bonding. Another youth described his eagerness to stay in this neighborhood and be an example for future generations:

When I was younger, I said, “Man, I wanna get outta this city.” Now I’m like back on the right track. So now I’m just like, “You can’t leave from where you are”— I’ve been here my whole life. So, I can’t just pack up and go. What about like the other people that’s here? I still got family out here. It’s not about leaving. I love this place. Let’s just make a change.

This youth described wanting to create change and improve the community that he grew up in, as opposed to fleeing it. Youth in this study recognized the importance of commitment towards their community as a path towards a better future.

In summary, despite the exclusions experienced by urban ethnic minority youth, they were still critically reflective, caring, and involved with their communities. They also recognized the importance of bridging and bonding, whether it came from a mentor or from their own family or friends. Youth often described wanting to create change by improving their own community.

6. Discussion

As a complex multidimensional concept (Littlewood et al., 2017), social exclusion has a detrimental effect on ethnic minority youth, including facing disparities in education (Allen et al., 2013), barriers towards employment (Vasile & Anghel, 2015), and community dissonance (Diemer & Li, 2011). Although collaborative efforts between governmental institutions and community-based programs have helped develop intervention efforts to decrease social exclusion among youth in low-income areas in various European countries (Littlewood et al., 2017), our study suggests that social exclusion continues to develop within families, and communities in the U.S. Hickey and du Toit (2013) made the case for thinking of inequality in the form of social exclusion, arguing that the value of such a conceptualization lies in focusing attention on two central elements, its multidimensional nature and the social relations that underlie it. Therefore, considering the interactions of each dimension and developing an explicit focus on power relations, history, social dynamics, and institutional socio-economic forces may contribute to our understanding of how to develop more inclusive communities (Weil & Percy-Smith, 2017). These authors emphasize that such an approach should include a focus on how the denial of economic, societal, and civil rights to marginalized groups links to their continued exclusion. The benefit of applying the concept of social exclusion is that it is not restricted solely to situations of economic deprivation and can therefore be useful at addressing the complexity of social inequality in diverse contexts and from diverse perspectives.

Our data reflected the multifaceted challenges faced by urban minority youth, who confront societal, economic, and community exclusion. Lack of community connection was reported as a stressful reality for youth, which is consistent with research that has linked exposure to neighborhood dissonance and violence with restricted emotional development. This includes aggressive behavior, depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, learning problems, and truancy (Milam et al., 2010). Although participants described their community as disorganized, often violent and insecure, with few available social and economic opportunities, youth in this study felt connected within their communities. As Freire (1979) suggested, it is not only critical to create spaces for marginalized voices to understand their lived realities and how social inequality affects their lives, but also of equal importance is to develop egalitarian and interactive relationships between youth, mentors, and adults. The framework proposed by (French et al., 2020) develops these elements while addressing structural inequality and social change. These authors suggest a new conceptual foundation encompassed by collectivism, critical consciousness, radical hope, strength and resistance, and cultural genuineness

and self-knowledge. Their premise is that minority and oppressed families and communities need radical healing beyond individual-level approaches to cope with intergenerational poverty, oppression, and exclusion.

Our data also indicated that youth were aware of their economic exclusion, which was described frequently in this study, as youth discussed manifestations of poverty and lack of opportunities throughout their narratives, perceived as unemployment, few educational prospects and incentives, among others, which made youth feel stress and anxiety. Feelings that stem from lack of resources can cause several negative socio-emotional reactions, including low self-esteem, poor coping skills, depression, anxiety, and self-defeating perceptions/behaviors (Twenge et al., 2003). Youth in the present study also expressed a strong acknowledgement of societal exclusion by describing diverse barriers (e.g., social safety nets and community resources) and recognized that governmental organizations had social initiatives that do not serve their purpose or their basic needs. The perceived failure of such initiatives is partially attributed to the lack of understanding of the needs of urban minority youth and the ignorance toward the critical role bridging and bonding and networking plays in promoting community change (Chen et al., 2015). Importantly, youth also expressed the need for bridging and bonding between themselves and mentors and within their own community as a strategy towards developing community inclusion. Moreover, youth's thoughts about their future were imbedded within reciprocal relational processes (Christens, 2012) because although socially excluded, youth wanted to be active participants in society. Recent research has highlighted the role of civic engagement among urban communities (Lardier et al., 2020), while describing the benefits of partnerships between local community centers and non-profits, which can provide support for the personal and collective development of vulnerable families (Di Napoli et al., 2019).

Urban minority youth who live in socially excluded communities are not defined solely by their challenges and barriers but are active actors in the shaping of their own life trajectories (French et al., 2020). In this context, youth's personal growth may be manifested in resources that are embedded in a constellation of social relations, where constructing positive relationships between mentors, students, and peers are at the root of developing agency. Youth recognized available resources and worked to change their own lives despite their economic, societal, and community exclusion, while advocating for more community support. Further, they recognized the importance of positive mentoring and of developing more life opportunities and their individual systems of support.

Our findings suggest that under-resourced minority youth experienced challenges stemming from social exclusion, where many perceived no end to the cycle of exclusion. This observation supports and extends prior research that explains how urban minority youth experience the achievement of future goals differently than non-minority youth (Pérez, 2015). Yet, youth displayed instances in which they defied social exclusion and were determined to break the cycle within their own lives. Although some shared the belief that work alone contributes positively to individual and social development, others defied it. Some youth perceived conditions such as family poverty as a condition linked to historical and structural contexts, and institutional barriers, which limited their socio-economic opportunities (Foster et al., 2017).

7. Implications

Considering social exclusion as an approach to inequality has several advantages, as it illuminates not only the lack of economic stability (i.e., income-based poverty measures), but also the unequal social and political relationships and processes that accompany these conditions and help sustain them. Consequently, in order to extend literature and further develop policy and practitioner practices regarding the constellation of social issues that social exclusion encompasses, researchers can apply this lens to further develop recommendations for policy and practice. Here, we advocate for a deep understanding of socially excluded urban minority youth via a multilayered approach. We argue and

promote the inclusion of youth by creating spaces for where marginalized communities can develop an open, honest, and egalitarian mentoring relationships between youth and adults. This implication is especially important in cultivating relationships in the form of bridging and bonding, where mentors help develop supportive relationships and enhance professional development skills for youth (Baldrige, 2014). Such associations may help counteract the effects of societal, economic, and community exclusion for urban minority youth (e.g., youth employment programs; educational opportunities; Carey et al., 2020). Further, we advocate for community inclusion by collaborating closely with youth towards economic stability (i.e., by developing targeted job-related programs and improving access to educational resources) and by creating spaces where youth can develop their own critical consciousness and explore their innate skills and interests (Baldrige, 2014; Lardier et al., 2020).

This study argues not only for the inclusion of the voices of youth from a community perspective, as the interconnections and networks youth develop are essential towards developing relationships that can facilitate advocacy and community change, but also to restructure the institutional forces that perpetuate social exclusion. Without an institutional restructuring, one that can provide socio-economic resources and opportunities, youth's current and further development of sense of community might be jeopardized. Successful preventive interventions for large numbers of youth require the involvement of prevention practitioners and community residents in community-level interventions (Baldrige et al., 2017; Wandersman & Florin, 2003). Moreover, to advance the implementation of culturally adapted interventions to ethnic minority populations, greater attention should be devoted local adaptations, participant engagement, and sustainability (Barrera et al., 2017).

Growth enhancing opportunities for urban youth to navigate social exclusion (i.e., barriers to accessing public resources) may begin to improve economic, social, and civic participation. Programs focused on youth offer an important framework to facilitate youth's agency and personal growth. Further, the link between the diverse dimensions of social exclusion and its effects on minority youth suggests it is imperative to work with youth in community-based programs. Specifically, fostering local education and training programs, offering concrete opportunities for integration in the labor market can be a public health advocacy tool to lessen the ill effects of social exclusion among urban ethnic minority youth.

8. Limitations

Although this study illuminates the social exclusion experiences of urban ethnic minority youth, there are some limitations. The sample of youth were from a specific region in the U.S. and represent diverse intersecting social positions, therefore, findings should not be generalized to other youth in different contexts. Although this sample was diverse and represented the larger host community, some youth were residents of border communities near the target community; yet, due to their proximity to the area and similar ethnic-racial and socioeconomic positions endured similar experiences. Youth within focus groups may have tailored their answers to adapt to the group, and/or at times individuals did not speak within groups. While rich information was gathered, we acknowledge we were unable to understand all youth's perspectives present in each focus group. Also, while there was consistency in our findings among youth between 16 and 27 years of age, future research is encouraged to separate participants by adolescents and young adults to further uncover variations in how they make meaning of social exclusion. Finally, this study emerged from a larger study focused on youth's expectations for sense of community. In addition, the original interview protocol did not directly inquire about social exclusion.

9. Conclusions

Despite limitations, this study makes important contributions to our understanding of social exclusion among urban minority youth in the Northeast U.S. This research highlights that while ethnic minority youth experience economic, societal, and community exclusion, they also develop agency, personal growth, and self-efficacy, with the assistance of positive mentorship. Social support in the form of bridging and bonding played a key role in the lives of youth, as this research found positive effects between youth mentoring and developmental and emotional outcomes, despite youth encountering numerous barriers. Future research regarding social inequality among youth should shift towards a social exclusion lens, which allows for an in-depth multilayered understanding of youth exclusion and the role community-based organizations play among urban ethnic minority youth. Future studies also need to consider youth voices and how current approaches can promote the agency and personal growth of marginalized youth. Moreover, community prevention initiatives should also be explored as an alternative to alleviating the exclusion of vulnerable youth. Such initiatives should include recognizing the importance of taking dynamic steps to decrease structural barriers, such as developing community connections, increasing educational resources and employment opportunities among vulnerable communities, and decreasing the barriers towards safety nets.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

1. Tell me, what does your future mean to you?
 - a. Where do you see yourself in 5 to 10 years?
 - b. Tell me about how confident you feel in achieving your goals? Please explain.

2. What resources will help you reach your goals? What services, if any, within your community have helped –e.g., social service agencies or alternative schools.
 - a. Adult-mentors
 - b. Parents
 - c. Other-mentors (counselors, teachers etc.)

3. Can you tell me about any problems barriers in your community that make it hard for you (and young adults like you) to succeed? If so what? Provide examples?
 - a. Substance use
 - b. Poverty
 - c. Gangs
 - d. Lack of Family/Support

4. What does community mean to you? Do you feel supported by your community and if so, how and why? How have barriers influenced your community connection?

5. I am interested to hear more about the organization you are each currently a part of. How has this organization worked with you (or not) in reaching your goals? Provide me with some examples.
 - a. Has it provided you with leadership opportunities?
 - b. Tell me about how this organization involves you in the community