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## How Activism correlates with Well-Being in Adolescence: a Systematic Review

Testa D. <sup>1\*</sup>, Cavallini F. <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Humanities, Social and Cultural Enterprises, University of Parma, Italy<sup>2</sup> Centro Tice Live and Learn, Piacenza, Italy

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The evidence shows that activism in adolescents is positively correlated with mental health and well-being, but there is a lack of in-depth research about this correlation. There are just a few studies, however, that refer to adolescent activism as a specific shape of social engagement, positively correlated to a multitude of well-being outcomes.

**Methods:** The present study aim to analyze correlation between activism and well-being during the adolescence by reviewing studies from the past 10 years to better analyze the impact of these topics on nowadays situation and to hypothesize the direction of it in the near future.

**Results:** Analyzing these studies, it emerged that activism during adolescence has been researched as a phenomenon that acts on various shades of well-being, both at a personal and a collective level. Among the selected studies, only one shows that activism is linked to more health-risk behaviors, rather than mental health.

**Conclusions:** Generating a group environment that empowers adolescents to build up their awareness and personal craving, work jointly on matters of bilateral regard, create abilities, and expand social connections could lead to real social change and moreover, could have real psychological well-being for the adolescents involved.

**Keywords:** *Activism; Well-being; Adolescent; Psychology*

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\* *Corresponding author:* Damiano Testa, Department of Humanities, Social and Cultural Enterprises, University of Parma, Str. dell'Università, 12, Parma, Italy  
*E-mail address:* [testa.damiano@gmail.com](mailto:testa.damiano@gmail.com)

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## **Introduction**

The evidence shows that activism in adolescents is positively correlated with mental health and well-being, but there is a lack of in-depth research about this correlation (Montague & Eiroa-Orosa, 2017). There are just a few studies, however, that refer adolescent activism as a specific shape of social engagement, positively correlated to a multitude of well-being outcomes. Just a few studies explicitly link activism to well-being, at the same time, the examination of the chosen 7 research showed confirmation in their outcomes. The literature is not always clear about the definition of activism that they use. Additionally, in several searches, it is mixed with words like “civic engagement” or “social engagement”, which is more geared toward other kinds of social actions. One of the goals of this study is thus to clarify the distinct definitions that are relevant to the topic. Likewise, the definition of well-being is not always the same between different studies and each of them seems to study both topics analyzing different perspectives. The focus of this systematic review is set on young people because of the unicity of the adolescence as a key moment in life for the birth of civic and social empathy and engagement as well as the scaffolding of their personal knowledge and consciousness regarding social issues. The methodology used for these studies ranged from questionnaires and surveys to focus group or interviews, and each research focused on different aspects of these topics. For all these reasons, the studies reached different outcomes but all those lead in the same direction: that increasing levels of activism match to higher level of personal and social well-being

## **Method**

For this review, the research has been done on the Scopus and PsycINFO database. An additional search through Google Scholar was carried out to find two studies that had been identified in the bibliography of a document previously reviewed. All searches were given a timeframe: from 2010 up to the present, the last search being carried out in March 2021 the search is limited to the past 10 years to better analyze the impact of these topics related to nowadays-social background and to hypothesize the direction of it in the near future. An additional selection was based on the reading of titles and abstracts. It provided on choosing just full-text papers and after that, it has included participants on average age between 14 and 20 Years old. From each of them, data was retrieved about: age, number and gender of participants; ethnicity (when possible); recruiting methodology and country where the study took place; the goal of each study; methodology and scales; duration and outcomes. The searches used the keywords “adolescent”, “activism” and “well-being”.

As represented in figure 1, duplicate results were removed. 27 records were identified from databases (Scopus and PsycINFO) and 2 records identified from Google scholar, then one record has been removed before screening because it turned out to be a duplicate.

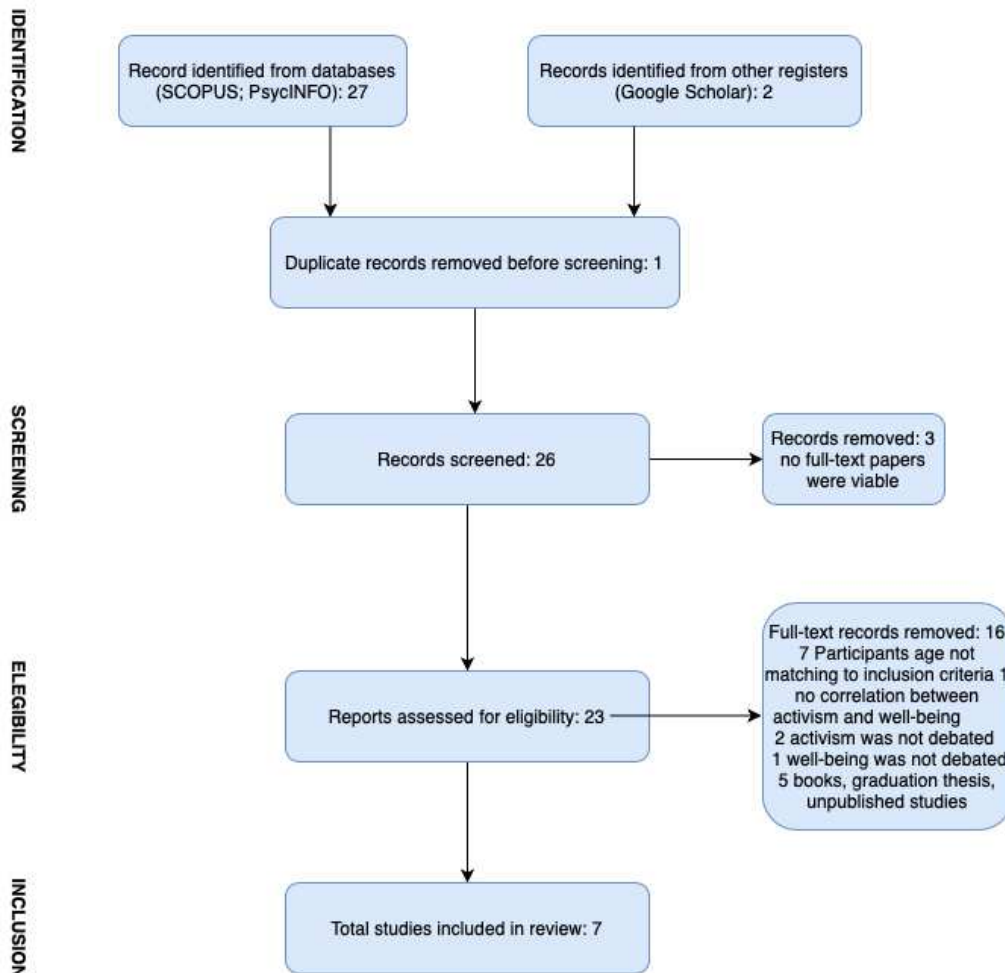


Figure 1 - PRISMA Flow Diagram

Three records have been removed for not having full-text papers available. On the remaining 23-full text records. Of these 7 have been removed because participants age was not matching to inclusion criteria, 1 have been removed due the absence of correlation between activism and well-being, 2 have been removed because activism was not debated and another one because well-being was not debated, 5 have been removed because turned out to be books, graduation thesis or unpublished studies. In this review, as reported in table 1, seven studies have been included.

TITLE, YEAR, AUTHOR	PARTICIPANTS (age, number, gender)	ETHNICITY (WHEN REPORTED)	RECRUITMENT / COUNTRY OF RESEARCH	RESEARCH INSTITUTION (WHEN REPORTED)	GOAL	TOPIC	VARIABLES (IF PRESENT)	ASSESSMENT TOOLS / TESTS	OUTCOMES
Adolescent psychological well-being, radicalism and activism SCOPUS	328 Italian adolescents (14-19 years) age's average 16.67 55% males	97% European Caucasian and 97% of them were Italian	Recruited from state high schools in southern Italy. The school principals, parents, and adolescents' written informed consent was obtained prior to collecting data.	the association of psychological well-being (PWB) with violent radicalism and nonviolent activism, by focusing on the mediating role of both social disconnectedness (SD) and the perceived illegitimacy of the authorities (PloA)	Data were collected during school time through an online questionnaire		VARIABLES: psychological well-being, Social Disconnectedness, Perceived illegitimacy of the authorities. CONTROL VARIABLES: age, gender, SES	BSMSS + ROSENBERG SELF-ESTEEM SCALE (1965) + Satisfaction with Life Scale + Doosje et al. (2013) + Activism and Radicalism Intention Scales	the results showed how Social Disconnectedness and Perceived illegitimacy of the authorities mediated the link of wellbeing with radicalism (negatively) and activism (positively)
ADOLESCENT POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND LONG TERM HAPPINESS: a 21 year longitudinal study on the development of micro-and macro worries SCHOLAR	in 1985: 1492 between 8 and 20 Y.o. average 14 year old adolescents (54% Females). In 2006: 220 between 28 and 40 Y.o. Average 35,2 years (61% female)		Germany - Through calls for participation to individuals who were all time working with children and adolescents requested to distributed questionnaire	Hypothesis1: activist are assumed to have lower self-related micro worries. Hypothesis 2 and higher macro worries. Hypothesis 3: Non-activists are assumed to report worse mental health than their activist age mates do. Hypothesis 4 activists are assumed to express relatively more macro worries than non-activist in mid adulthood	participation of people who were working with children and adolescents who were requested to distribute a four pages questionnaire to the youngster	Micro and macrosocial worries, future mental health, threat of a nuclear war. Activism vs Non activism	21 years (waves were interspersed 3 and a half year each	4 pages questionnaire, Trier Mental Health Scale by Becker (1989) sub selection of items from the German version of the Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS-G; Boehnke, Silbereisen, Reynolds, & Richmond, 1986), and a one-item happiness indicator by Fordyce (1988)	all four Hypothesis were confirmed
IN IT TOGETHER: EXPLORING HOW BELONGING TO A YOUTH ACTIVIST GRUP ENHANCES WELL-BEING SCOPUS	32 members of Amnesty International UK's youth group. 12 boys/ 20 Girls Age between 14 and 18		UK, An email outlining the aims of the research, number of students needed, time commitment, and levels of consent required was sent to adult leaders of approximately 500 youth groups to gauge initial interest 7 focus group in classrooms throughout the UK	How being an activist as a teenager can positively affect personal development and well-being	Focus group, interviews. Braun and Clarke's six-stage thematic analysis (TA)	A place to go, Power in numbers, Skilling-up in it together and several subthemes	Focus group no longer than 45/50 minutes		A place to go appeared 32,49% on times, Power in numbers appeared 23,10% of times, Skilling-up appeared 27,26% of times, in it together appeared 17.15% of times

Table 1 – Main points of each of the selected studies (continue)

TITLE, YEAR, AUTHOR	PARTICIPANTS (age, number, gender)	ETHNICITY (WHEN REPORTED)	RECRUITMENT / COUNTRY OF RESEARCH	RESEARCH INSTITUTION (WHEN REPORTED)	GOAL	TOPIC	VARIABLES (IF PRESENT)	ASSESSMENT TOOLS / TESTS	OUTCOMES
Impact of adolescent and young adult civic engagement on health and socioeconomic status in adulthood PSYCINFO	9,471 People M. age: 15.9 years old. 49,4% female - 50,6 Males	White: 68,9% - Black:15,7% - 3,2% Asian - 10,6% Hispanic - 2,4% another race	U.S.A. - school-based design to select a stratified sample of 80 high schools and feeder middle schools with selection	Examining the link between voting, volunteering and activism during adolescence and socioeconomic status and mental health in adulthood	The data were drawn from Waves 1, 3, and 4 of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health	SES; Civic engagement (vote, volunteer, activism); SES and health outcomes in young adulthood	The data were drawn from Waves 1, 3, and 4 of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health , 12 months	all questions constructed for the goals of the Add Health study were not drawn from any existing measures	Volunteering and voting are associated with subsequent mental health and health behaviours. Activism is associated with more health-risk behaviours and not associated with mental health. Civic engagement in not associated with physical health
SOME BENEFITS OF BEING ANACTIVIST: MEASURING ACTIVISM AND ITS ROLE IN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING SCHOLAR	STUDY 1: Average age 19.2, 341 students, 62% female , 344 students, STUDY 2 TOO OLD AGED	83% Caucasian	An email was sent to all students of a small miwestern u.s. college	activists tendencies would positively be associated with indicators of well-being	online survey	vitality, meaning in life, positive affect, negative affect, meaning in life, Activist vs non activist groups self-actualization, psychological need satisfaction		Activism orientation Scale (AOS), Meaning of life questionnaire, Activist Identity and commitment scale (AICS)scales for life satisfaction, Vitality scale, scales for self-actualization an positive/negative affect	all activism measures were found to have high reliabilities
Reasons youth engage in activism programs: Social justice or sanctuary? SCOPUS	N = 83 youth across eight programs, and focus groups average age 15.2, 43%males, 49% female, 7% other	51% African American, 21% multiracial, 16% Caucasian, 2% American Indian 1% Asian	USA	How do the competing reasons of social justice, sanctuary, and personal relations affect youth decisions to attend youth activism programs and why?	101-item questionnaire and focus group interviews	Leadership, civic participation, attendance motivations and opportunities for skill building.			for youth in social activism programs, the idea of sanctuary—a space that protected and affirmed their social identities—drove their attendance nearly as much as the desire to engage in social justice work
Preparing to Participate: The Role of Youth Social Responsibility and Political Efficacy on Civic Engagement for Black Early Adolescents SCOPUS	N = 118; age 10-15 (12,8); 64% girls	Black Americans	Midwest united States - Participants were recruited from three middle schools - As an incentive for participation students received a university pen and were entered into a raffle to win a \$25 Visa gift card.	youth social responsibility and political efficacy beliefs are directly related to civic engagement and whether the relationship between youth social responsibility and civic outcomes varies by level of political efficacy among Black early adolescents in the Midwest United States	40 minutes survey	Political efficacy; Civic Engagement; youth social Responsibility. 4 dimensions helping action, community action, political action. Activism		Youth Social Responsibility Scale - Youth involvement inventory	Political efficacy moderates the relationship between youth social responsibility and activism, such that the relationship between youth social responsibility and activism is stronger for Black youth with higher political efficacy beliefs. There is also an indirect effect of youth social responsibility on the relationship between political efficacy and civic engagement.

Table 1 – Main points of each of the selected studies

## Results

Defining activism, it is important to clarify what activism is considered to be, because searching on previous studies about this topic, it emerged that frequently activism has been assorted up in the research context on other topics, like “volunteerism” for example. Some terms such as *collective action*, *activism* and *socio-political involvement*, are often contemplated as more ideologically filled, while others, such as *volunteerism*, or *social engagement*, *community service*, are assumed to be more impartial (Eiroa-Orosa, 2016). The main difference between volunteers and activists is that the first ones are those who supply assistance to the community give service within the ongoing social system, while on the contrary activists wish to change parts of the social structure to make a change at a whole community or global level by challenging the status quo.

Aggregating all subjects from each of the 7 selected studies (see table 1), participants were 11.782: 49.5% girls, 49.9 boys and 0.05 identified as “other”. Eighty percent of the participants were gathered in a single study so, considering the diversity of subforms of the variables analyzed in the different studies, the sample is unbalanced on just certain concepts. Participants are equally distributed between males and females but considering the topic, thinking about how activism is bond tight to LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community and how much in the last few years is strongly emerged about the non-binary gender identification, it would be interesting to see how activists would identify their gender in future studies.

The average age of subjects was 15.75 years, and the searches were carried out in several different countries: 4 studies were implemented in the US, 1 in Germany, 1 in the UK and 1 in Italy. Five out of the seven studies also reported the ethnicity of participants and results were as follows: Caucasian: 7.141; black: 1.647 Asian: 304, Indian American 2; Hispanic: 1.004; other: 15. Regarding this, it would be interesting to analyze in parallel the correlation between activism and well-being and how it may change depending on the ethnicity of the participants. Literature says that people who belong to minorities are more likely to interface with activism as a response to a personal condition, this stands in contrast to the data of these studies considering that 60% of the participants was identified as Caucasian.

Recruitment of participants for these studies has been done via schools: in some cases, by sending participation requests via school e-mails, on others by asking personally to students. In one case, individuals who were at the time working with young people were asked to distribute questionnaires (teachers, church group leaders, NGO activists, pediatricians, etc.) (Boehnke, Wong, 2011). Five out seven studies considered a single administration of questionnaires.

These studies used several different scales for measuring outcomes, most were questionnaires, two surveys and in two cases they included focus groups or interviews. For this reason, some used standardized scales, in some case they used adaptation of scales and in others the questions constructed for the study was not drawn from any existing measurement. Mentioned scales and questionnaires include:

- Activism and Radicalism Intention Scales (ARIS) (Moskalenko and McCauley 2009)
- Activism orientation Scale (AOS) (Corning A.F & Myers, D.J, 2002),
- Activist Identity and commitment scale (AICS) (Klar & Kasser, 2009)
- BSMSS (Barratt W, 2006)
- Meaning of life questionnaire (MLQ) Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006)
- One-item happiness indicator by Fordyce (1988);
- Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS-G; Boehnke, Silbereisen, Reynolds, & Richmond, 1986)
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965)
- Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985),
- Scales for self-actualization (SAS; Jones & Crandall, 1986)
- Six-stage thematic analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006)
- Subjective Vitality scale (VS) (Ryan and Fredericks 1997)
- Trier Mental Health Scale by Becker (1989)
- Youth Inventory of Involvement (YII; Pancer et al., 2007)
- Youth Social Responsibility Scale, Pancer et al., 2007

## **Discussion**

Analyzing these studies, it emerged that activism during adolescence has been researched as a phenomenon that acts on various shades of well-being, both at a personal and a collective level. Among the selected studies, only one shows that activism is linked to more health-risk behaviors, rather than mental health. Additionally, this review reveals that socio-economic (SES) status is also correlated both to activism and well-being during adolescence. Activism could operate on SES in many ways. It is significant that the association connecting activism, education level and personal earnings are some of the most solid of the three forms of civic engagement. Even though not much is known regarding the part played by activism in development, it is believed to ease positive growth especially in marginalized youth scenarios (Hope & Spencer, 2017; Watts et al., 2011), and some studies discovered links between perspective for social engagement and higher SES amidst neglected youngsters (Diemer, 2009).

Activism is an important environment for youth development, especially from poor and neglected situation, to be part in with like-minded peers to take a stance about social issues (Ballard, Hoyt, Pachucki, 2019). Research on adolescents intricated in a distinct form of activism defined as “youth organizing”, shows that the previously mentioned young people build up salient abilities and individualities (Conner, 2011) and reveal superior probability to reach their academic goals. For this

reason, it seems relevant to hypothesize an increase in instruction and education aimed at pursuing higher goals regarding activism. One of these studies also found that well-being at the same time mediated positively with activism and negatively with radicalism (Costabile et al, 2020). The expression “radicalization” put a name to a procedure by which people adopt utmost credence approaches that could “justify the use of violence to effect social change” (Maskaliunaite, 2015). In the only longitudinal study found in literature, in addition to highlighting higher levels of well-being reported by subjects defined as "activists" in comparison with those who define themselves as "non-activists", both in adolescence and in follow-up during adulthood, subjects labelled as activists showed higher levels of "macroworries", that consist in showing an evaluation of political and social goings- on, with one's own resources to look after the political and social sphere, as well as personal ethics (Boehnke, Wong, 2011). Regarding this, we suppose that young activists will show more elevated measures of macroworry, depending on their above average sensitiveness to sociopolitical tension, which meanwhile could vary with finer psychological health (Boehnke, Wong, 2011) while reporting lower levels of “microworries” because of their objecting the self or those with whom one better identifies himself. (Boehnke, Wong, 2011). This shows how at the base of activism there is a wider and less selfish vision of life. This concept is reported in several studies in which activism is strongly linked to a sense of belonging and community (Albanesi, Cicognani, Zani, 2009) as well as personal shelter (Montague, Eiroso-rosa, 2017). Montague and Eiroso-Orosa (2017) also suggest more studies regarding how *collective* activism impact on well-being, as it emerged that the activists interviewed consider themselves more satisfied when they felt they were not acting alone. In this regard, the constructs of self-esteem, self-realization and satisfaction for life scales are the most utilized.

### Conclusions

Exploring the impact of activism on well-being would be a fundamental component in the blooming of a positive psychology sphere, especially with respect to adolescence, which is a crucial phase of life marked by converging biological changes and social experiences that create unique key stage of opportunity for development (Dahl, 2004). Multiple developmental frameworks suggest that activism led by young people within their communities can play a crucial part in development. Research on mental health activism is growing but, at the same time, it is still especially scarce in the case of adolescents (Montague & Eiroa-Orosa, 2017). It has been shown that activism is correlated with social well-being and not just with subjective well-being (Klar, Kasser, 2009). This review provides concepts located in existing teenage activism research as intrinsical stimulus, ethics, social connections, potency, and also disputes the viewpoint argued in many studies that one

has to be personally affected by the issues one is campaigning on to get well-being benefits from activism (e.g., Kirshner, 2009; Pearce & Larson, 2006). Conclusively, generating a group environment that empowers adolescents to build up their awareness and personal craving, work jointly on matters of bilateral regard, create abilities, and expand social connections could lead to real social change and moreover, could have real psychological well-being for the adolescents involved (Montague & Eiroa-Orosa, 2017). The main limitation is that it seems to be little research on the psychological benefits of being an activist, especially in relation with adolescents. Additionally, the positive impact of activism on well-being resulted to be not the major focus in the majority of studies found in literature, this means that this specific aspect received limited relevance. Literature commonly either focuses entirely on activities such as volunteering or just do not distinguish activism from other kinds of civic engagement (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). A limit regarding the distribution of participants, as said before, is that more than 80% of them came from just one research, so the distribution of intervention is not evenly spread. Five out of seven of these studies were implemented in a single moment in time, while only two had follow ups to investigate the topics in a second moment, so most do not give many indications on how adolescent activism can or cannot be linked with well-being over time during adolescence and young adulthood. Moreover, just two studies had control groups, so it is hard to do comparison about compare the levels of well-being between activist and non-activist adolescents. Finally, activism has been measured with self-reporting test and questionnaires, as well as the well-being scales, which are well known for their limitations. Future studies should demand participants to choose their own issues to take action on, investigate the impact of regular activism, comparing well-being between shapes of activism addressing different issues, and mismatch those who advocate for others rather than for their own concern (Montague & Eiroa-Orosa, 2017). Also, from the perspective of sociopolitical development, it is reasonable to expect that the effects of adolescent activism on health and well-being will be mixed. The ways in which activism might undermine health and well-being should also be considered, so it could be important to conduct research about potential negative aspects that could be related to activism. Conceptualization and measurement of personal and social well-being as well as activism need more examination to better define the discriminations between these constructs for adolescents subjects and fields of overlapping with a sense of community. Future research should also make a stronger use of longitudinal data across the duration of adolescence, maybe by using training programs and focus groups. We also recommend, considering the relevant importance of peer sharing during adolescence, more research regarding the impact of collective activism on well-being.

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### Authors' contribution

Testa D. & Cavallini F. assisted with concept, study design, data analysis, manuscript preparation and manuscript editing; Cavallini F assisted with the generation of the initial draft of the whole manuscript, manuscript editing and data interpretation; Testa D.assisted with manuscript editing and study concept; Testa D. assisted with manuscript editing, data analysis, data interpretation, and study supervision. All authors contributed and approved the final manuscript.

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