

# ACTIVISM, LEADERSHIP, & ACTS OF RESISTANCE AMONG EMERGING ADULT WOMEN ACTIVISTS

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## BACKGROUND

Systemic injustice and discrimination are deeply rooted in society and affect the lives of marginalized peoples. In order to confront these realities some scholars have explored how enhancing an awareness of sociopolitical as well as personal forces may help youth and emerging adults survive and overcome structural constraints. Watts et al. (1999) describe **sociopolitical development (SPD)** as the process through which **“individuals acquire the knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and the capacity for action in political and social systems necessary to interpret and resist oppression”** (p.185).

Although SPD has been studied across many populations, its role in the lives of women, and particularly women of color, is woefully understudied.

Using content analysis, we examined the everyday and extraordinary ways that SPD manifested in the lives of a group of emerging adult women, mostly comprised of women of color, enrolled in a community leadership training program. Conclusions from this study may shed light on developmental processes related to SPD, and aid in developing similar programs and initiatives that promote political activism, political participation, and social justice.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

**How do sociopolitical developmental processes manifest in the everyday lived experiences of emerging adult women activists?**

## METHODS

- Single-site, qualitative research study of young women activists in a community leadership training program
- 13 individual interviews with young women (20 to 26 years old; 95% women of color)
- Interviewers: African American and Afro-Caribbean doctoral students and faculty
- Sessions: 50-120 minutes long; video or audio recorded semi-structured interviews; transcribed verbatim
- Participants received a \$25 Amazon gift card as an incentive for completing the interview

### Coding

- Coders: 2 undergraduate research assistants
- Content analysis and thematic analysis (Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G., 2019)

## RESULTS

**Preliminary content analysis revealed 35 thematic codes that reflect manifestations of sociopolitical development among women.** Three commonly reflected manifestations of SPD were: 1) Critical Social Analysis; 2) Youth Education and Youth Empowerment; and 3) Acute Acts of Political and Social Resistance.

Participants also highlighted the relationship between spirituality, activism, and their pursuit of justice. Our findings suggest looking beyond participants' individual and collective actions, and studying their sociopolitical aspirations.

## EXEMPLAR CODES

**CRITICAL SOCIAL ANALYSIS** - Reflection regarding society, culture, policies, and practices with an eye towards injustice and how injustice and power are embedded in those things.

**QUOTE :** “The problem is important to know, obviously ... I don't linger there ... We all know [it] exist[s], but there is work to do to ... navigate it, change it, break it ... Where my energy lives, is like in this other space of, 'What are we doing about this thing that we know [is] already happening' versus it just being like, 'the world is burning'.” - *SASSI*

**EDUCATING YOUTH/YOUTH EMPOWERMENT** - This category should be used to code for instances when a Bakers participant educates youth and expands youth's sociopolitical knowledge. This can stem either directly from their project in the program, some social work they do in a community, or a facet of their profession.

**QUOTE :** “But, the root of this issue in criminal justice, we're not encountering our youth enough, to feel like they can do more, and be more than where they are.”  
- *SPRING*

**ACUTE ACTS OF COLLECTIVE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RESISTANCE** - This category should be used to code explicit, time-limited acts of resistance (e.g., protests, signing petitions) that are done in concert with other people as means of enacting socially just programming and policy. These acts are done or spoken about in a collective sense.

**QUOTE :** “By empowering ourselves and doing the work that we do ... we're kind of like, not disseminating the power, but we're really like spreading it out and saying, no, you don't have ... the absolute authority, or the absolute truth on something, or [it's] not because this is how it always is that we're gonna accept that.” - *MALIKA*

## CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

**Participants' personal narratives reveal the everyday complexity and richness of sociopolitical development.**

**CRITICAL SOCIAL ANALYSIS:** *SASSI* splits social analysis into three parts: 1) **analysis of the problem**; 2) **pseudo social-analysis** (i.e., collective hypocritical pretense at ignorance about the problem); and 3) **analysis of the solution**. She insists that we are in a period of pseudo-analysis not analysis. Justice requires moving on to an analysis of how to solve the problems.

**YOUTH EMPOWERMENT:** *SPRING* points to **generativity as empowerment**. Part of caring for emerging generations is engaging them to take up their own power in the service of their survival.

**ACUTE ACTS OF COLLECTIVE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RESISTANCE:** *MALIKA* suggests that **the goal of activism is not just redistribution of power**. The goal is for all people to actively resist everyday forms of oppressive authority, received truths, and status quo.

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS:** We are continuing our content and thematic analyses of women activists' sociopolitical development and how SPD manifests in their lives.

## SOURCES

- 1) Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2019). Thematic analysis. Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences, 843-860.
- 2) Watts, R. J., & Guessous, O. (2006). Sociopolitical development: The missing link in research and policy on adolescents. *Beyond Resistance*.
- 3) Watts, R. J., Griffith, D. M., & Abdul-Adil, J. (1999). Sociopolitical Development as an Antidote for Oppression—Theory and Action. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 27(2), 255-271.

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