
Rethinking Youth Political Socialization: Teenage Activists Talk Back

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Abstract

This article draws from the experiences and narratives of teenage activists throughout the Americas in order to add a needed dimension, that of peer political socialization, to the larger political and civic socialization literature. The authors argue that although the existing literature emphasizes the roles and responsibilities of adults in shaping young people's civic capacities, the roles that young people play in socializing each other for political engagement is underexplored. Based on two qualitative studies of teenage activists throughout North and Latin America, the authors argue that teenage activists, who are largely left out of this literature, represent a different process by which youth engage in politics. We use teenagers' narratives about their own youth-led political socialization to extend the existing theorizing on youth civic engagement, rethink some of its core tenets, and elucidate the roles that young people themselves play in the processes of political socialization.

Keywords

youth activism; political socialization; inequalities

As Youniss et al. (2002) have noted, policy makers, educators, and researchers across the globe are expressing deep concerns about the political and civic capacities of youth; this is especially the case during times of political and

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economic flux. The current era of globalization represents an historical moment when the world order is shifting and a stable global future is needed. To many adult observers, this stable global future can only be secured through the capabilities of youth to take over and “forge the future,” presumably as responsible adult citizens who are politically engaged. Partly out of anxieties about widespread political and economic instability, partly out of concerns about increasing political and civic disengagement (Putnam, 2000), and partly out of an accompanying recognition that young people can be valuable participants in building a democratic future, many adults are now turning their attention to the best ways to “train,” “engage,” and “socialize” youth to become active citizens.

Within this civic competence and political socialization literature are a number of explicit and implicit assumptions about how these socialization processes work for youth. Research has consistently emphasized the role of families in shaping the political orientations of youth, of schools in training young people to become engaged in their larger societies, and of community or government organizations in giving young people opportunities to practice and develop civic skills (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003). However, as Yates and Youniss (1998) point out, young people themselves also play a major role in the processes of political socialization. Youniss et al. (2002) note “political socialization is not something that adults do to adolescents, it is something that youth do for themselves” (p. 133). Despite this stated interest in youth-led political socialization, however, a great deal of research and policy continues to focus on how adult-run institutions such as schools, community organizations, governments, and even the private sector can “promote” civic engagement in youth. Very little has been written about the ways in which youth themselves are actively involved in their own political socialization.

In this article, we draw on the voices of politically active youth to understand political socialization from their perspective. Specifically, we focus on youth activists, a group that despite being politically active and engaged is mostly absent from the theorizing in the civic engagement literature. Based on two separate qualitative studies of progressive youth activists in several cities throughout the Americas, we articulate a distinct process by which these youth experience political socialization: one that articulates a critique of the normalization of youth apathy and is less dependent on adult socializers and adult institutions and more dependent on peer networks. We argue that these processes of *youth-led* political socialization can both extend and challenge much of the accepted wisdom of the conventional model of adult-led political socialization.

Literature Review: Adult Solutions to a Crisis of Youth Apathy

A powerful story about young people's political apathy and waning interest in politics around the world serves as the discursive background and narrative justification for many civic engagement programs and calls for enhancing the political socialization of today's youth. In the United States, a major report on the need for improved civic education in schools argued that such education is required to "address disturbing trends related to youth civic engagement, including a decrease in young people's interest in political discussion and public issues; their tendency to be more cynical and alienated from formal politics, more materialistic, and less trusting; and a decline in their voter participation rates" (Levine & Gibson, 2003, p. 5). The United Nations' 2007 World Youth Report's chapter on Latin American youth also argues that young people in this region are growing "increasingly apathetic" (United Nations, 2007).

The many government and foundation-sponsored reports that call for increasing attention to young people's political training and socialization are, in part, based on the academic writing of civic engagement scholars. These scholars have catalogued what they see as the waning civic spirit, lack of political knowledge, and general apathy of young people (Delli Carpini, 2000; Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002; Thomson et al., 2004; Williamson, 2002; Youniss et al., 2002). The "crisis" of youth disengagement has been depicted as "one of the most disturbing and crucial questions facing our nation's political future" (Sitaraman & Warren, 2003, p. x), and as creating a "disenchanted and irresponsible youth generation" (Henn et al., 2002, p. 167). In much of this literature, youth distrust of government signifies youth political disengagement and is taken as further evidence of the crisis of youth political apathy. For example, Sitaraman and Warren (2003), in a book developed in coordination with Harvard University's Institute of Politics, conclude that youth in the United States have a "dismal commitment to politics" in part from a survey finding that 64% of students do not trust the federal government to "do the right thing most of the time" (p. 17). Similarly, included in Delli Carpini's (2000) review of the evidence for youth disengagement is the following statement: "In a recent survey, a majority of high school students could not name a single government or non-government public leader who had the qualities they most admired" (p. 343). The UN World Youth Report backs up its statements on Latin American youth disengagement with statistics on political distrust and low levels of "confidence in the political system." Although these findings about distrust, lack of admiration, and so on are not

usually the only evidence given to prove youth disengagement, they are still seen as evidence of this trend. Throughout this literature, youth participation in political campaigns, contacting public officials, intention to vote, and youth distrust of government and politicians represent a range of factors that together become the “standard measures of civic engagement” (Delli Carpini, 2000, pp. 340-342).

Some scholars use their findings about distrust and distance from the government to argue that youth are not simply lazy citizens spoiled by relative comfort (Manning & Ryan, 2004) but are alienated from government—they are cynical, not apathetic (Delli Carpini, 2000; Henn et al., 2002; Sitaraman & Warren, 2003; Strama, 1998). Lasse Siurala (2002), the Council of Europe’s director of youth and sport describes the situation in this way: “The political alienation of young people has reached a point where increasing numbers of young people are either completely disinterested and ignorant of politics or have gone over to extremist political movements (neonazis, skinheads, the Animal Liberation Front, Gangsta Rap, etc.)” (p. 12). In this case, critical and activist youth are lumped in with hate groups and seen as a potential “danger” and threat—they are less likely to be well-behaved citizens. Distrust and displeasure with government are thus seen by some scholars as attitudes that need to be corrected and overcome in order to address the youth apathy crisis.

Recent research has suggested that the picture of youth apathy is not so bleak when we include reform movements, boycotts, or other “unconventional politics” and community service (Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003; Youniss et al., 2002; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999). There is also an increasing acknowledgement that youth are not disinterested in politics per se but rather in formal politics more specifically (Henn et al., 2002). However, the disinterest in formal politics remains a major concern for many of these civic engagement scholars; studies of informal and extrainstitutional forms of participation often treat these modes of political action primarily as vehicles for socialization into the more “ideal” practices of voting and formal politics (Metz et al., 2003; Youniss et al., 1999). Rooted in research on political socialization, this literature continues to be principally interested in socialization into prescribed roles and normative engagement. For example, Youniss et al. (1999) looked at whether service participation helps to integrate youth into “normative adult society.” The role of political socialization and civic engagement programs, then, is to teach young people how to work with their governments and how to be good citizens rather than allowing them to continue to “adopt non-standard approaches to participation that do not necessarily promote societal cohesion” (United Nations, 2007, p. 67). In short, they aim to

encourage youth to participate in explicitly less critical or dissident forms of political activity than those practiced by most of the youth activists we study.

Responding to this crisis of youth disengagement from formal politics, scholars of youth political socialization often suggest the need for adults to socialize young people to become active, responsible citizens. Through an analysis of various programs including classroom civics curricula (Levine & Gibson, 2003; Levine & Lopez, 2004), service-learning initiatives (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Owen, 2000; Yates & Youniss, 1998, Zeller, 1993), city youth councils (Geddes & Rust, 2000; Guerra, 2002), and political simulations (McDevitt & Kiouisis, 2006; Rosenthal, Rosenthal, & Jones, 2001), they explore the ways that adults and adult institutions foster youth political and civic learning. As Youniss et al. (2002) state to an *adult* “we”: “Ultimately, we will be placing the world in young people’s hands” (p. 126). Summarizing this position on the centrality of adults to youth political learning, Andolina et al. (2003) write,

Families can be important role models. . . . Schools can open the doors to civic and political life as well as teach specific civic skills . . . Religious institutions, policy organizations and other groups can also invite young adults to participate in specific acts. . . . Together, these individuals and institutions can hold sway over the public participation of today’s youth. (pp. 279-280)

Friends, peers, and other youth remain absent from this list of socializing influences.

Although not denying the value of adult-sponsored programs or the significance of adults in young people’s lives, our analysis examines the experiences and perspectives of youth activists to add a needed dimension, that of youth-led political socialization, to the existing insights of the youth civic and political engagement literatures. By broadening this literature, we hope to rethink some of its core tenets: namely, that there is a crisis of youth apathy signaled by young people’s retreat from formal politics and that the solution is adult-led political socialization of youth into formal political processes. As we will demonstrate, youth activists, who are most certainly already politically active, hold a different view on the youth apathy crisis. They challenge the very existence of the crisis and identify impediments to youth political engagement that are not typically included in the youth civic and political engagement literatures. Finally, these youth activists also problematize the notion that the solution to youth civic and political disengagement is adult-led socialization.

Method

Our analysis is taken from two ethnographic studies of youth activism between the years of 2002 and 2006, collectively. Each study was conducted separately and each author coded her own data. One study, conducted between 2002 and 2004, focused on the ways in which race, class, gender, and age inequalities shape the politics of urban youth activism in the United States (Gordon), and the other study, conducted between 2005 and 2006, focused on girls' participation in alter-globalization movements throughout the Americas (Taft). In neither study did we set out to specifically study the ways in which youth activists understand and complicate adults' approaches to youth political socialization. However, we found this to be an important and consistent theme that arose in both of our studies. The first author conducted research on youth activism in two U.S. West Coast urban areas: Portland, Oregon, and the larger East Bay of the Bay Area in California (mostly Oakland) to understand teenagers' political organizing strategies in the larger context of race, ethnic, class, and gender differences. This comparative study focused on two youth activist networks: (a) a mostly White, middle-class Portland citywide high school student network who organized around issues such as the War in Iraq, corporate power, and school budget cuts and (b) a network of mostly working-class and poor students of color in Oakland who organized against the war in Iraq, school budget cuts, increased standardized testing, and the prison industrial complex, among many other educational and social justice issues. In addition to attending teen activists' strategizing meetings, community forums, rallies, protests, and retreats in both sites over a 2-year period, the author supplemented this ethnographic research with 40 semistructured in-depth interviews with both boy and girl activists, and some of their adult allies, in both sites.

The second author presents data from a larger study of teenage girl activists across five cities in the Americas: Buenos Aires, Caracas, Mexico City, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Vancouver. The 75 girls who were part of her study ranged in age from 13 to 19, but the majority were either 16 or 17 years old. These girls were all actively involved in social movements. They organized around a wide range of social problems including labor issues and youth labor rights, educational reform, environmental racism, economic justice, corporate power, human rights, gender equality, antiracism, media democracy, indigenous rights, and political repression, to name a few. In addition to being part of issue-specific groups and campaigns, they were also involved in a wide variety of socialist, communist, anarchist, Zapatista-informed, feminist, and other broadly Left parties, collectives, and youth organizations. In each city,

the second author conducted, recorded, and transcribed in-depth, semistructured interviews with these girls in English or Spanish. The author attended and took extensive field notes on a wide range of political events involving teenage girls and collected printed materials from the organizations in which these girl activists participated.

In the course of comparing our research, we discovered that both of us had found significant and quite similar patterns in our participants' responses to claims of youth apathy, their critiques of adult-led socialization models, and their emphasis on the role of peers in political socialization. Thus, having both identified similar trends, we began to combine our data around this theme, compiling quotes and ethnographic examples related to young activists' ideas about apathy and political socialization. In doing so, the patterns became even clearer, and the findings outlined here represent a strong current throughout both of our data sets.

Youth Responses to the "Crisis" of Youth Apathy

Contesting Youth "Exceptionalism"

The narrative of crisis and apathy claims that youth political action is extremely unusual for today's teens. In addition, although many adult commentators show concern over the "crisis" of youth apathy, teens in our studies perceived that adults regularly come to *expect* this crisis. Many of the teens we interviewed described interactions with adult activists, community members, and youth development workers who say that it is "amazing" that they are involved in politics. In contrast to the oft-stated adult idea that youth activism is rare and very special, many of the youth we studied suggested that any youth can become an activist and argued that the idea that they are "so amazing" actually limits young people and is condescending. In the second author's study, girls said that this perception made youth activism seem exclusive and not like an activity that all youth can engage in. Josephine and Megan, two White middle-class Vancouver teens, talked about their frustrations with adults who think they are "sooo incredible." Sitting together on a swing set for a quick lunch-time interview, the two girls had the following conversation:

Josephine: Like, some people, like we were saying before, adults are so amazed, like, "wow, you are so young and you are doing all this stuff," and before I was like "thanks" and everything, but I just realized . . . that they are congratulating me because they don't—it is not

even in their head that somebody so young could even accomplish something like this.

Megan: They don't think it is possible.

Josephine: So it's not like, "oh, good job."

Megan: It's actually not a compliment.

Josephine: It's more like, "what are you doing, I'm so impressed you could even have gotten that far. And you are the only youth, you are the only one who could do it. And all your other friends, they should all be like you. . . ." And I'm like, "no, everybody does that."

Megan: Yeah, they think we are special.

Josephine: Yeah, we hear stuff that you are so special.

Megan: And we're like "no, it is normal."

Josephine and Megan suggested that they were not really all that special and that the idea that youth activists are "amazing" assumes that most youth are not capable of such involvement. In making youth activism extraordinary, they argued, the discourse of specialness or exceptionalism associates the social category of youth with inaction and inability. These girls interpreted the adult emphasis on their specialness as an insult to youth. In their view, when adults say that youth activists are really special, they portray youth activism as a big deal; something that only extraordinary teens are involved in. Youth activists' refusal to see themselves as special is thus partly based in a belief that all youth are capable of becoming and being activists.

The first author found a similar critique among youth activists, especially among middle-class, White youth in Portland. Portland teen activists found the admiration they received from adult activists to be double-edged: on one hand, students felt uplifted when they heard "Hey, you guys are amazing! When I was in high school all I did was smoke pot!" from adults. On the other hand, this type of praise reinforced for these youth organizers that adults *expected* them to be apathetic, hedonistic, individualistic, and self-absorbed. Hayden noted that sometimes this praise still smacked of an adultist patronizing,

You know, sometimes the adult praise is good. But sometimes, it really sounds like what you would say to a toddler taking their first steps, like "Oh, good! Look at what you did! Good for you, you cute little kids!"

Hayden's critique shows how the discourse of exceptionalism can also demean youth by infantilizing them. As activist youth in both of our studies pointed out, an infantilizing discourse of exceptionalism makes it even more difficult for adults to recognize young people's political power.

Youthful political participation, these youth activists suggest, is not extraordinary, but “normal,” and should be treated as such. Youth activists are usually part of communities that include many other youth activists; it is therefore not surprising that they reject the normalization of youth apathy and the notion of a crisis. Because of their location amongst other active teens, they see themselves not as isolated individual exceptions to the rule of youth apathy but rather as just a few examples of a more extensive group. So, although it is not actually true that “everybody does this,” as Josephine says, it is the case that she knows a lot of other teens who are equally active. From the perspective of these teens, youth activism is in fact fairly normal; they see themselves as just one of the many youth they know who are involved in social movements and social change.

Youth activists challenge two facets of the “youth apathy crisis” discourse: they contest the idea that youth are in a “crisis” of political apathy and that therefore their political engagement is the exception to the rule, and they contest the way in which this adultist discourse *normalizes* crisis: the implication being that the baseline, “normal” youth state *is* the crisis of youth apathy, and the exceptional state is youth engagement or noncrisis. The youth we encountered in our studies rejected the assumption that young people are always (normally) in a state of crisis. As 17-year-old Ixtab in Mexico City put it, “Adults don’t always realize that any youth, or adult, or just any person can become involved in politics.” Her statement reflects the view that *anyone* can become involved in politics: youth and adults alike. From young activists’ vantage point, many youth around them *are* politically engaged or have the potential to become politically engaged, and thus they question the very existence of a crisis of apathy and challenge the discourse of exceptionalism that often accompanies this perception.

Roots of Youth Civic Disengagement: Race, Class, and Gender Contexts

Having a strong sense of their own political power, our interviewees contested assumptions about pervasive youth apathy. However, they also noted the real challenges in trying to mobilize their disengaged peers. Rejecting the discursive normalization of the crisis of youth apathy, they provided a much more nuanced analysis of the political disengagement that they saw among other youth. To be sure, some of these teens actually named their peers’ inaction as *apathy*, but they spoke at length about how this apathy was constructed through larger social processes. This was true especially among White, middle-class activist youth. Consider the following exchange between 16-year-old

Portland activists Sara and Kristin, who attributed their peers' inaction to middle-class comfort and obliviousness:

Kristin: "There are a lot of people that are like . . . I don't know what to say . . .

Sara: "They just don't understand."

Kristin: "Like, everything is just kind of going on around them."

Sara: "Everything is confusing about politics, so they just say "oh, whatever, it's the government", and they don't really get involved. If they just sat down and thought about things, they'd realize that a lot of things they support are bad. But they don't think about it, so it doesn't affect them."

Kristin: "Well, there are so many people living in their comfort zone. They have everything that they want, so they can't imagine having problems in their country. And they can't imagine what that would be like for someone else. I mean, some kids pretty much have everything they want, they've never had to struggle for anything. I mean, do you see that, Sara?"

Sara: "Yeah, totally. A lot of kids are just so sheltered."

In this exchange, Sara and Kristin agreed that it is difficult to organize their peers into movements for social change because their peers do not feel the immediate effects of social problems. Thus, social problems are going on "around them" rather than directly affecting them. They are able to insulate themselves from the rest of the world, and often times they use material comforts and consumer culture to do this. However, social problems like school budget crises can penetrate White, middle-class student apathy. Once the problems ceased to go on "around" them and came knocking on their doors, many middle-class White youth became concerned, critical, and with the help of their youth activist networks, organized and politically active.

In contrast to the dominant youth apathy crisis discourse, not all youth in this study used the term *apathy* to describe the political disengagement of their peers. In fact, low-income Black and Latino youth in Oakland did not identify apathy when describing their nonactive peers. Instead, *cynicism* and *hopelessness* were key words. Like middle-class White youth in Portland, Oakland teens also aimed to shift their peers' political consciousness. However, their major goal was not necessarily to "wake up" their peers to social problems going on around them. Working-class and poor teens of color already know firsthand the social problems of poverty and violence that come with living in impoverished, racially isolated conditions. They are not operating under the

illusion that everything is fine and that problems exist far outside their communities. Eighteen-year-old Oakland organizer Gayle explained this as she reflected on being a student organizer at her school:

High school is too hard. Cause when you walk in the door, it's like, something bad is going to happen. You can feel it. You walk up there and you just feel like something is going to happen. Somebody is going to get hurt, somebody is going to get kicked out of class, somebody is going to miss out on an education and it's not supposed to be like that.

I mean, everyday it's a new teacher. Every year it's a new principal. Every minute it's some more mess. And it makes you want to give up. It makes you want to say "to hell with it." I don't ever remember the Brady Bunch going through drama like this! Everybody just wants that rose-colored beautiful high school . . . but it's never like that.

As Gayle indicated, the major problem is not insulation, comfort, and apathy but rather an internalized hopelessness and cynicism among youth that comes with living in impoverished, violent, and racially isolated conditions. These teen organizers spoke at length about the extent to which a deep-seated cynicism prevents many youth from becoming hopeful enough to pursue social change. As 16-year-old Oakland organizer Guillermo said, "What would I change about my school? I would change the way people's attitudes are. How like, most of their attitudes are so negative towards everything. Everything is always like "fuck this," and "I am going to beat somebody up" or "we're going to jump them" or something like that. "I would just wish for everybody to have a positive attitude and be down to make change." Although the political socialization literature overwhelmingly discusses apathy, young people talk about both apathy *and* cynicism; two manifestations of political disengagement that fall along race and class lines of power and privilege.

To complicate the youth apathy crisis discourse further, some of our interviewees even perceived cynicism and hopefulness to be a *gendered* phenomenon. This was especially true for the girls in the second author's study who were active in girl-dominated social movement spaces. Some of these girls articulated the reasons for numeric dominance of girls in their organizations, suggesting that girls are more active partly because of their own gender socialization. Girls, they explained, are expected to be hopeful, dreamy, idealistic, and compassionate. In addition, as they discussed the gendered traits that encourage girls' participation in activism, these girls outlined the opposing traits of masculinity that make boys less likely to become politically involved. Given their emphasis on

girls' idealism, these young women suggested that boys are less active partly because they are cynical or pessimistic about the possibility of change. Violet, an upper middle-class biracial teen from the San Francisco Bay Area, said that there were more girls who organized in her youth group because

In terms of my friends and other peers that I have, I feel like males are much more, in my community, tend to be more just frustrated with the system and cynical. Not apathetic, but just cynical in a way that makes them want to disengage. Whereas more of my female peers, like, stemming from the same issues and the same problems will say "this is really fucked up right now, so what can I do and how can I help."

Transforming middle-class girlhood's conventional association with thoughtless naïveté and innocence into an assertion of girls' inclination toward politicized optimism enabled these young activists to place political value on the fairly common image of girls as "dreamy" and hopeful. Thus, the gender analysis of the privileged girls who were part of girl-dominated spaces led them to articulate youth inaction not just as the result of apathy or privileged disinterest but instead as a function of highly gendered traits and "attitudes." Gender socialization, then, can be seen as a resource for overcoming political disengagement. Interestingly, Violet is an upper middle-class girl who is biracial (White/Jewish and Japanese) and who has mostly organized in White, Jewish spaces. Her politicization of the social expectations that girls will be "innocent," "dreamy," and "hopeful"—the transformation of these expectations into political optimism also represents how political socialization exists at the nexus of gender, race, and class systems of power and privilege. The social expectations for girls, that they will be innocent, dreamy, and hopeful, are specifically images that are most often projected onto White, middle-class girls. These same expectations do not necessarily construct dominant images of girlhood for girls of color and working-class girls.

Like the low-income youth of color in Oakland, the low-income girls of color who were active in girl-dominated movement spaces also emphasized the many problems in their communities that contributed to cynicism and hopelessness. However, for these girls, their own gender socialization was also seen as a resource whereas teenage masculinity was seen as a barrier. As Clare said, "girls are allowed, and boys are not, to like really care about stuff." Or, in Diana's words,

Activism is something that you really have to be passionate about, you really have to put your heart and soul into an issue that you care about

and I think like because of the way that gender roles are set up, it is not, like teenage boys don't really want to show that they really love something and that they really want to make a change.

Thus, overcoming youth inaction requires tackling not just violence, consumption, and poverty but also the gendered expectations that push young men to "not care" and "be tough" rather than to "really love something."

In short, youth activists themselves challenge the language of exceptionalism and the adultist discourse of "crisis." They also challenge the powerful image of youth apathy, offering more complex racial, class, and gendered explanations for different types of youth political disengagement. Rather than normalizing and essentializing youth apathy, they point to all the social and historical threads that *produce* political apathy and cynicism. They recognize that youth political disengagement is a social problem that can be transformed through youth organizing and large-scale social change.

The Solution: Youth-Led Movements, Peer Political Socialization, and Generational Alliance

Experiencing Adulthood During Political Development

Adulthood, or the "assumption that adults are better than young people and are entitled to act upon young people in many ways without their agreement" (Checkoway, 1996, p. 13) is part of the background and social context of all adult/youth relationships. Our research with youth activists suggests that these young people have developed an extensive critical analysis of adulthood and age-based inequalities. This analysis, then, plays a significant role in their overwhelming rejection of the model of adult-led political socialization. Although adulthood as a concept is virtually absent in much of the political socialization literature, teen activists frequently recognize the many ways in which age inequality and adulthood affect their experiences of political development.

The youth activists we studied were wary of adult attempts to involve youth in civic or political development opportunities (such as local government youth councils, for example). These activist youth argued that many of these adult-sanctioned civic engagement opportunities do not always give youth real opportunities for full participation because these well-meaning adults see what they are doing as "socializing youth for the future," rather than actually engaging youth in activism that matters in the present. Teenage activists are

critical of models of civic engagement that do not accord any real political power to youth in the present and encounter these models throughout schools and various community organizations. Youth activists in our study who organized for school change identified this conventional model of political socialization to be alive and well in structures like student government. Many of these youth constructed their activist identities in direct opposition to the model of student government, which they viewed as designed to run students through the motions of electoral politics while denying them actual political power. Consider the perspective of Pilar, a Latina high school student organizer in Oakland:

Student government is definitely not a place for student voice. It is a popularity contest. The popular students get into this club and into this group or whatever, and they plan rallies, plan dances, school dances. And they are really school-spirited. That's it. So it's non-political. It doesn't connect with the community. All they do is like, campus clean-ups. They try to bring a school spirit to the students. And I don't think school spirit is important at all. I mean um, like, it's cool to have activities at times, it's like a break from reality trying to pretend your school is all fine and dandy. But it's not.

Student activists did not simply critique their peers who participated in student government: they critiqued student government as a model of civic engagement designed by adults to "train" students for future participation while estranging them from real political power in the present. They argued that student government is ill equipped to involve students in more fundamental school decision-making processes such as curriculum design, school budget issues, hirings, standardized testing schemes, and a host of other educational justice issues. Although the political socialization literature does not problematize the role that adults play in socializing youth for political engagement, young activists definitely do.

Outside their schools, young activists encounter and criticize adultism in community organizations which are designed by adults to "engage" youth. Take for example 16-year-old Shandra, a Black girl who had been active in other types of Oakland youth organizations before becoming an organizer with Youth Power (YP):

There is "Teens on the Move" or "Youth Arts," but they are not about fighting against oppression, they are dealing with just straight on violence. Not fighting for youth justice, not fighting for this and not going

on like “This prop came out, we are going to march with the rest of the people,” you know. Like, I feel what they do, but to me, I am more comfortable within YP.

Like, there it was more “You guys sit down, we give you some curriculum, you go over it and then you go teach the main players.” And I wasn’t really feelin that. I was like “How come we can’t facilitate meetings sometimes?” Or “How come we can’t get more involved? How come we just have to listen to what you say?” Like, they give you a choice to voice your opinions, but in the end they just kind of knock them down.

In Shandra’s critique of adultism, some “youth” organizations see teenagers mostly as crucial instruments of peer-to-peer communication, rather than as valued designers of curriculum, discussion facilitators, community organizers, or social justice visionaries. In the end, it was this adultist model of youth participation that drove Shandra away from these organizations. Shandra’s perspective was not unusual. We found that almost every teen activist we encountered recognized and criticized adultism in community activist networks, even among the most seemingly progressive adult activists. Ella was involved in several organizations in her Bay Area community that were working on addressing the achievement gap between White students and students of color. She noted that in these

mixed groups with kids and adults, the adults truly don’t respect what kids say at all. As liberal or progressive as the group is, like, they just don’t really listen to what kids—I mean, they listen and they act like whatever, but they don’t really, they don’t really take into account stuff that youth say.

Lisette, a San Francisco Bay Area teen who organized around environmental racism issues, said,

I kind of feel like, in a way, wherever we go we usually get tokenized, like, oh, you know, youth are doing such a good job, and you’re so smart and it’s just like, no. This is really like what we do, and we actually do work that matters. . . . I just wish that they would take us like more seriously, like you know, this is stuff that we actually put a lot of hours into.

For these activists, youth activism is not just “cute” or about training youth for the future, but it is a politics that *matters*. Lisette, like many other activists

in our studies, asserted that she and her peers are doing “real work” and that their contributions should not be seen as less than those of adults. In their view, youth activism is “serious” activism, not just an exercise in political socialization.

Several teen activists even argued that it was an injustice that many adults are more ignorant about politics than they themselves are, yet these adults still have the right to vote just because of their age. Rachel, a Vancouver 17-year-old, said,

I think the whole age thing is kind of a controversial issue. . . . Some teenagers who are so into the political issues, they actually do research on things, but they’re not, they can’t vote because they’re not old enough. Whereas you have adults, some adults who will not vote and or they just go and pick [their] favorite name or something. . . . And sixteen is kind of like, at the age range where, in high school, you are learning and thinking and studying how government works. Kids are more aware than you think they are.

Sixteen-year-old Troy, a Portland activist, remarked, “It’s amazing, because a lot of the radical [adult] activists we work with, the ones that are patronizing towards us, usually haven’t been organizing as long as we have.” Adult-led socialization models imply that youth are ignorant and uneducated about politics, something youth activists loudly disagree with. Lolita, a Buenos Aires 16-year-old said,

It seems to me that youth know very clearly what it is that we want. We know what kind of education we want, what kind of country we want, but people still think that we don’t have a critical position, that we aren’t able to speak or form our own ideas. From my point of view, they are wrong. I believe that we can discuss everything equally.

Many youth activists see themselves as very careful and strategic political thinkers, and they want their ideas to be listened to with equal respect and consideration.

Especially for girl activists in girl-dominated networks, a critique of the adult socialization model also becomes a critique of the male domination that is often embedded in this model: “We demonstrate to people that it is not just men who are capable of doing this work that, until recently, was mostly directed by men. We are an example . . . and we show that to other girls.” Alicia, from Caracas, indicates here that one reason that adults cannot really

socialize youth into political action is because when something is adult-dominated (or male-dominated), youth (or girls) will not feel like it is a space for them, a space that they can be involved in. If there are not enough youth involved, according to many teen activists, then youth will not feel welcome. Alicia's criticism of adultism and sexism in the adult-led political socialization model underscores how adultism often works in conjunction with sexism, in particular civic contexts, to exclude girls in particular from political decision-making processes.

The political socialization literature advocates a process of socialization that flows down from more experienced, knowing adults to less experienced, naive youth. In this conceptualization of political socialization, age inequality does not impede the transfer of political knowledge and skill from adults to youth. Indeed, it is an axis of inequality that is not recognized in this model. Although invisible to adult theorists and many adult activists alike, youth recognize the many ways in which adultism complicates the promise of adult-led socialization approaches to engage youth in politics.

The Limitations of Adult-Led Political Socialization: Generational Differences

In addition to the unequal relationship between youth and adults which inhibits adult-led political socialization, youth activists often argued that there are substantial generational differences between their politics and those of adults. This meant that they did not want to be trained into the adult model but rather felt they were creating their own politics for their own generation. Patricia, an articulate 17-year-old from Peru who participated at the World Social Forum, argued that youth see the world and do their activism differently:

Because of the era too, right? Because before it was all, I don't know, the Cold War influenced everything, I don't know, the Russian Revolution. Well, at least in Peru, this stays with the adults, right? I didn't live much in this era. The Berlin Wall fell when I was born, so, sure, there's a difference.

Teens might be looking at the same set of issues and concerns as adults, but activist youth argue that they see the world differently based on their generational experiences. As Tamara stated,

It was a different struggle back then. You know, you have your grandparents talking about the civil rights movement, but, you know, it is a

totally different, you know, atmosphere, so we have to be able to take what they did, you know, and apply it to what we have, but really it is not the same game.

Young people's claim about their generational identities impacting their political selves is supported by the literature on political generations, which has found that "when society changes rapidly and cohorts come of age under different conditions, the members of each cohort are likely to develop their own perception and style of politics" (Sazama, 2001, p. 215).

Portland activist Jacob explained why he did not feel that adults could "socialize" him into politics and why he felt disrespected by the adult activists in his community. Here, he viewed generational difference through the lens of adult-dominated peace organizations in his city:

Some larger liberal organizations . . . they are living this culture difference and this age difference. Like, these are people trying to remember stuff that happened from the sixties, and trying to do as they did. And we're just trying to find new ways to do stuff. And some people don't like the way we march, or agree with the tactics we use. So they shut us out. It's like a stab in the back. I mean, our activist culture is just a little different from the adults.

Importantly, the ways in which youth activists criticize the model of adult socialization and generational difference are also contextualized in young people's national histories. In Argentina, for example, girls felt like their parents had been so brutally repressed by the experience of living through the dirty war that they were not interested in or able to really socialize youth for activism. They viewed their parents as fearful and disheartened. Argentine girl activists perceived that adults could not socialize them because many adults did not have hope. As Julia observed, "There's a lot of fear and frustration in the adults. There is a lot of feeling that everything was in vain."

Although all teens in our studies felt that generational differences were salient enough to render the model of adult-led socialization problematic, we did notice that teens who viewed their parents to be part of marginalized, oppressed communities tended to look more to older generations' political insights than did White, privileged teens. The latter group tended to see adults like their own parents as "part of the problem." The globalization of corporate power, environmental crisis, the growing inequality between the rich and poor, the prevalence of war, and a host of other social and political developments within the past decades stood as evidence to some White, middle-class youth

activists that the movements of the 1960s and 1970s were ineffective in creating a more just society. This belief was reinforced by the lifestyles of some of these activists' own parents, who appeared to have "sold out" in exchange for material wealth and the comfort of middle-class, insulated lives. Portland teen activist Amanda's narrative about her parents was instructive in understanding why some White, middle-class teen activists did not feel like they could learn a great deal from previous generations of progressive activists:

Like my parents, they were pretty politically active in college. And then they became lawyers . . . and now my dad, instead of being sort of liberal, he drives his little, well not little—his *big* Ford F1-50 gas guzzler. And he kind of criticizes protesters for being dumb. He's really lost a lot of integrity, and that scares me. People get so numbed by their little lives . . . And it's really sad, because there is so much leisure time, and so much comfort in our country—that nobody really *needs* to worry about any other problems. And so they exploit people without even knowing it. And when you criticize them for that, they don't even see it, they can't even see that the problem exists or know what's going on.

Contrast this view of generational difference with that of Rae, a Wsanic native teen from Victoria Island:

Young people don't have all that experience of all the things have gone on. We don't have all the experiences of the outcomes that the older people know, so a lot of questions need to be asked. I have to go ask my uncles and my aunts and my parents and my grannies what they think because they've lived their lives and they know all the negatives that might happen and they know what could occur. . . . Yeah, I think we need to be in communication.

In this same vein, 16-year-old Oakland organizer Itzel explained the dual character of her political struggle in terms of generational alliance and difference: "Like, there is always different struggles to fight, a different culture we're fighting to struggle *in*, you know what I'm saying? It's always going to change when the generation changes, but it will still be the same fight." From Rae's and Itzel's narratives, we see that some youth not only recognize generational difference but also advocate for generational alliance. More often than not, these are teens who come from marginalized, oppressed, and colonized communities and thus are finding their power through linking their current

struggles to their ancestors' struggles. Although their narratives communicate a need for adults' input and alliance, this is a different vision than what many adult-led socialization approaches would suggest. These youth view adults as important allies; seeking solidarity, exchange of information, and more horizontal (rather than hierarchical) intergenerational communication. In youth activists' visions, adults can be vital allies rather than top-down socializers.

Youth activists' desires for generational alliances are not, however, frequently realized as a part of their regular experiences as activists. In fact, many youth activists we encountered actually have very few ongoing relationships with adult activists. Although the structure of youth activist organizations varies, with some groups needing faculty sponsors or adult facilitators and others being entirely youth run, we noticed a striking similarity across our many sites of youth political action: there were very few older adults (older than young adults in their 20s), who were actively mentoring and "socializing" youth into political activity. We believe this commonality is important and reflects the ways in which age inequality and generational divides may actually inhibit processes of adult-led political socialization. Instead of being socialized by adults, we found that youth activists were far more likely to be engaged in peer-driven and youth-led socialization processes.

Youth-Led Socialization

Many adult activists, in ways that resonate with the assumptions underlying the political socialization literature, talk about the importance of "teaching" young people how to become politically and civically involved. However, according to youth activists, adults are not always the best ones to do this political education work, and they question whether they need to be "taught" everything by adults. Instead, they suggest that peer-based political socialization is, in fact, more effective. Yelitza, a 13-year-old girl from Colombia, described how her organization is "for children by children. We kids teach other kids." The idea that youth themselves are the best people to educate other youth (and not just to *communicate* to other youth) gives young activists an important and distinctive role within political socialization processes and within social movements more broadly. Diana, a San Francisco Bay Area activist, said that part of why youth organize better educational events than adults is because youth are

less rigid, more about open discussion and less formal, less of a classroom setting. Like I'm talking to you and you're gonna listen and then you're gonna like learn something. It is more about sharing

perspectives. And I'm not saying that all adults do that [preach instead of share information], cause I know there are good adults out there . . . but that is a big difference . . . youth kind of give you open space.

As Oakland organizer Shandra explained, real political development means being able to learn *and* teach at the same time, which blurs the usual stark lines between youth-as-students and adults-as-educators:

I feel like I got power. Like, the best thing though is just learning. Just consuming so much knowledge. That is like, the bomb to me, cause I like learning and especially when I learn about something that I never knew about before, and I can use to my advantage and change something—that's tight. And like, I can go share with somebody else, so it's like learning hella much and then teaching, so that's the best part.

These quotes suggest that youth activists see a great deal of value in youth-led political socialization, of teens teaching teens. Outside adult institutions, they are constructing their own spaces for political socialization and helping each other develop their political knowledge and skills.

This is not to say that the youth activists we met completely eschewed adult participation in their movements. On the contrary, we found that many teen activists were forging important relationships between themselves and slightly older individuals. These connections with slightly older mentors and supporters are, according to many youth, a key part of their development as activists, and are very much rooted in particular national contexts and social movement legacies. Across sites, we witnessed different relationships between teens and these older mentors and even different conceptualizations of “youth” as a social category. Sometimes these older mentors were considered to be “older youth” and sometimes they were considered to be “young adults,” depending on the social movement context. School-based youth activist groups are likely to be entirely made up of teenagers, particularly in those cities where there is a history of teenage self-organization in the schools. In Mexico City's CCH's,¹ student ages range from approximately 14 to 25. In these spaces, the older students take on a key role in the political education of younger students. Their presence in the Mexican *cubiculos* and activist organizations is strongly felt and, for the most part, according to the younger teens, very positive. In Argentina and Venezuela, many girls are part of “youth” wings of political parties, explicitly defined to include both teens and people in their twenties. The institutions of Leftist political parties, which have historically included

“youth wings,” are a major force in many countries around the world but much less powerful and visible within social movement activity in the United States. Teenagers’ relationships with these older youth mentors are, according to many girls in Latin America, both more comfortable and less hierarchical than their relationships with older adults.

In contrast to these multiage Latin American youth spaces, North American mentors are more commonly staff members in youth leadership organizations than fellow “youth” in multiage youth groups. When young adults are “official” staff, it is not surprising that teens often see them as different from themselves and as adults rather than youth. Despite being more likely to be seen as adults than as peers, however, North American teens do indicate that in some of these organizations, working with young adults is very valuable to them. In fact, these instances of youth-adult organizational alliance in North America are often tied to larger racial, class, and gender contexts. The first author has argued elsewhere that especially for low-income Black and Latino youth in Oakland, adult allies are crucial in connecting these youth with needed material resources (such as spaces to meet) and supplying forms of cultural capital that these youth, who are located at a particular nexus of age, race, and class oppressions, need to become empowered and effective community organizers (Gordon, 2007). It is for these reasons that low-income youth of color often integrate young adults into their activist network in ways that more privileged White, middle-class youth do not. Furthermore, North American adult allies sometimes mediate difficult relationships between teenage girl activists and their parents, especially around the negotiation of teenage girls’ mobility, which results in girls’ more regular attendance at coalition meetings, organizing retreats, rallies, and protests. Even White, middle-class teenage girls without these adult allies found themselves torn between their parents’ worry and control and their own wishes to participate in community activism (Gordon, 2008). Some low-income youth in Oakland argued that it was because of rampant adultism that they needed adult allies to serve as their interfaces to other powerful adults to advance their movement goals. As 16-year-old YP Oakland student organizer James explained,

James: It’s to the point where students are like “oh, the principal is not going to listen to us,” and it’s like “okay, well they are going to listen to an adult, so we need an adult.”

(HG): What if YP was all youth? Do you think . . .

James: Um, I don’t think that would progress. Because, you know, how the government and the principal only listen to adults.

(HG): So you feel like, if you guys got together, just yourselves, no adults . . .

James: No, it wouldn't work. Yeah, cause, um, it's like, they don't listen to us. We have to have an adult.

Despite their vital presence in these teen activists' lives, the young adults within these youth networks were less socializers than they were key allies, providing specific resources (some gained from having adult status) that teens disadvantaged by multiple systems of power needed, while still giving youth their own spaces for autonomy within these organizations. In YP, for example, teen organizers identified their own social justice goals, initiated their own social justice campaigns, and created and taught their own political education workshops.

Contrary to adult-led political socialization approaches but consistent with a multiracial feminist perspective, youth activists value peer-based, youth-led political organizations and adult allies who explicitly recognize ageism to be a legitimate oppression, one that works in concert with other systems of oppression. In Oakland, for example, young adults who were staff members of funded youth activist organizations often reflected on the ways in which they sometimes held and perpetuated adult privilege. Their politicized understanding of ageism allowed these allies to recognize age difference, disrupt ageism, and stand in solidarity with youth, recognizing that the teens themselves were the real political visionaries and leaders within their own movements (Gordon, 2007). In contrast to a top-down political socialization approach then, youth activists and their young adult allies are constructing an approach to political socialization that centers the already significant knowledge and skills of youth.

Conclusion

Although not commonly included in the literature on youth civic and political engagement, we believe the experiences and perspectives of youth activists who are already engaged in social movements offer new and important insights into the processes of youth political socialization. The very existence of vibrant youth movements points to a youth milieu in which youth apathy is neither a crisis nor the norm for all youth. Rather than normalizing youth apathy, youth activists' narratives on youth political disengagement provide a more nuanced understanding of how youth political disengagement may be constructed differently along race, class, and gender lines. These narratives offer new insights into the role that larger axes of power and privilege play in shaping patterns of youth civic and political disengagement. Finally, youth activists' perceptions of the ways in which age inequality and generational difference impact their experiences with adults offers an opportunity for us to further theorize the

role that age and generation differences might play in shaping power relations between potential adult “socializers” and youth political actors.

Beyond simply extending our understanding of the factors that shape youth political development, however, we believe that the experiences and perspectives of youth activists force us to rethink some of the deeper assumptions that run throughout the political socialization literature. In several articles and books that identify the crisis of youth apathy, for example, conceptual leaps are made between findings about youth distrust of government to conclusions about youth disengagement. After studying youth activism, we find that the evidence for this so-called crisis needs to be looked at more carefully and critically. Indeed, the activists we studied may be skeptical of government, critical of its version of politics, and wary of many of the proposed “ideal” forms of civic action, but they are most definitely politically engaged. We urge scholars who study youth political socialization to expand their scope of what counts as “political engagement” to include social movement activism as a legitimate form of youth political activity.

In contrast to the civic engagement scholars who take critiques of government as evidence of young people’s lack of political knowledge and as an indication of a crisis of disengagement, the second author has argued elsewhere that such criticisms and expressions of distrust are based instead in girls’ critical analysis of power relations and inequality, or, in other words, their political consciousness (Taft, 2006). While we tend to read this kind of youth cynicism as healthy political critique and dissent, a substantial group of scholars and policy makers see it as a problem. As we expand the scope of youth civic engagement to include more dissident forms of youth political participation, we find that we cannot as easily take young people’s critiques of government as evidence of youth political disengagement. Indeed, we caution other scholars against making such a conceptual leap. Our assessment of whether there is a “crisis” of youth apathy, and how widespread this crisis really is, depends largely on whether we continue to ignore or discount the many forms of young people’s social movement activism. Furthermore, by privileging more normative forms of civic engagement, many youth political socialization scholars implicitly place a higher value on the eventual adult political subject than the actual youth political subject. In recognizing youth political activism, we advocate for a shift away from conceptualizing young people only in terms of their future adult political subjectivity and toward examining young people’s political subjectivity in the present.

Young activists’ critique of the youth apathy crisis discourse should also prompt youth political socialization scholars to rethink some of the basic assumptions underlying this crisis. For these activists, youth apathy

does not have to be inevitable or normal. Their critiques of adults' perceptions also imply that "youth apathy," just like adults' apathy, is a process that is actively socially constructed—it is not simply the *absence* of political engagement (Eliasoph, 1998). The fact that *some* youth are politically active, like the youth we studied, means that youth apathy is not the baseline for all youth: it is not the *tabula rasa* on which adults must intervene and properly socialize youth. Nor is it a "normal" but disturbing developmental stage that precedes the fully developed, adult political subject. We must therefore understand youth apathy (for nonactivist youth) as something that is actively created through multiple processes and points of social exclusion. The "youth apathy crisis" discourse in the literature implies that even though youth apathy is a crisis—it is still based on a "deficit model" of social citizenship (Osler & Starkey, 2003): a presumption that young people are normally politically ignorant and uncaring by virtue of their age and largely unaware of their rights and social responsibilities. This requires adults to intervene and socialize them properly. Although the literature decries the crisis of youth apathy, it does not really investigate how youth apathy is constructed for nonactivist youth or how and why activist youth disrupt the processes which contribute to youth apathy. Instead, there is the implicit assumption that youth apathy is the normal, presocialized state of being. Indeed, in the conventional model of political socialization that is often prescribed in this literature, youth apathy becomes essentialized for all youth.

In the cases where the political socialization literature does recognize cynicism as distinct from apathy, there is very little analysis of how this cynicism is shaped specifically through intersecting systems of oppression. Furthermore, young activists point to clear social factors that promote each of these forms of political disengagement: material comfort and consumerism on one hand, and violence, racial and ethnic isolation, and poverty on the other. Importantly, these youth activists do not speak of political disengagement as either a baseline condition or a normal facet of being young. As these youth activists point out, the discourse of "exceptionalism" often accompanies the youth apathy crisis paradigm. Although the literature does not problematize this accompanying discourse, youth activists argue that by making youth action seem like the purview of only "special" teens, the discourse of exceptionalism actually limits, rather than facilitates, the possibility for young people's political participation. Young activists' critiques of the youth apathy crisis discourse could prompt scholars to denormalize youth apathy and instead investigate the many social forces that construct youth political disengagement among different youth populations.

Young activists' critiques of adultism and generational divides also challenge us to rethink the ubiquitous emphasis on adult-led political socialization as the solution to the crisis of youth apathy as portrayed in the political socialization literature. In both their narratives and their actual organizing processes, youth have carved out autonomous places for themselves to develop as political actors. Teenagers' position on the utility of these separate, youth-only spaces is reflected in the larger literature on identity and activism. In their introduction to *Forging Radical Alliances Across Difference: Coalition Politics for the New Millennium*, Bystydzienski and Schacht (2001) note that one of the primary lessons of identity politics is that particular self-identified groups "need to have a 'room' of their own" and then build coalitions from these starting points (p. 7). In the same volume, Burack (2001) writes, "contemporary feminist scholars generally recognize that it is the thought and scholarship of women of color that provides most support for coalition discourse and politics" (p. 39). She argues that this scholarship acknowledges intersectionality and recognizes both political discontinuities and the need for affiliation across those discontinuities. Given the multiple social forces that intersect to produce the possibilities for, and barriers to, youth political engagement (not least of which is ageism), multiracial feminist theory provides us with an alternative way to understand the political socialization of youth. In particular, such a perspective highlights the importance of recognizing power differences between adults and youth as they work to build cross-generational alliances.

Rather than welcoming adult-led efforts to guide their political organizing, in many cases youth have actively resisted these attempts. Unlike most political socialization theorizing, youth activists recognize how age inequality and generational difference render problematic the accepted wisdom of the top-down, adult-to-youth political socialization model. We urge political socialization scholars to more carefully attend to the ways in which adultism and generational differences may complicate adult attempts to engage youth in politics and to rethink the simplistic top-down approach of the kind of adult-led political socialization that is often promoted as the solution to the problem of youth political disengagement. We also urge these scholars to take seriously the significant potentials and possibilities of the more peer-based, youth-led political socialization approaches as well as the alternative models of generational alliance, that thrive in the many youth social movements throughout the world.

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1. The *Colegio de Ciencias y Humanidades* (CCH) high school system was a product of the Mexican university movement of 1968. Instituted by coalitions between students, professors, and activists, these Mexico City campuses include more open, politicized curriculums that students design themselves.

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