

Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Health and Social Justice Activism in Changing Times"

Documenting Sociopolitical Development via Participatory Action Research (PAR) With Women of Color Student Activists in the Neoliberal University

Jesica Siham Fernández^{*a}, Jasmyne Y. Gaston^a, Madeline Nguyen^a, Jaia Rovaris^a, Rhyann L. Robinson^a, Danielle N. Aguilar^a

[a] Santa Clara University, San Clara, CA, USA.

Abstract

Political activism attests to the sociopolitical development and agency of young people. Yet the literature sparingly engages the intersectional subjectivities that inform the sociopolitical development of young people, especially women of color. Important questions remain in the theorizing of sociopolitical development among youth engaged in political activism within higher education settings. Thus, we focus on the following question: What experiences informed or catalyzed the sociopolitical development of women of color student activists within a racialized neoliberal university in the United States? In addressing this question we demonstrate how student-led participatory action research (PAR) within the neoliberal university can facilitate and support sociopolitical development. Of most value, this paper demonstrates how PAR can be used as a tool to support the intersectional sociopolitical development of student activists organizing within racialized neoliberal settings of higher education that threaten the academic thriving and overall wellbeing of students of color, specifically women of color. Sociopolitical development theorizing must engage elements of relational healing as a dimension of wellbeing. Therefore, our work contributes to these conversations by centering the experiences of women of color student activists.

Keywords: political activism, participatory action research (PAR), sociopolitical development, relational healing, Black feminist thought

Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2018, Vol. 6(2), 591–607, doi:10.5964/jspp.v6i2.900

Received: 2018-01-04. Accepted: 2018-09-20. Published (VoR): 2018-12-21.

Handling Editor: Flora Cornish, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom

*Corresponding author at: Ethnic Studies Department, Santa Clara University, 500 El Camino Real, San Jose CA 95053, USA. E-mail: jsfernandez@scu.edu



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Since its early formation U.S.-based community psychology has called upon community psychologists to be political activists, agents of social change, and “participant-conceptualizers” (Bennett et al., 1966); to be dissenters and transgressors in pursuit of liberation and empowerment for disenfranchised communities. Community psychology was born out of the frustrations with the field, specifically clinical psychology’s approach to mental health and wellbeing, as well as the discipline’s modest engagement with civil rights efforts. These shortcomings were viewed as antithetical to the discipline. Thus, in recent years community psychologists have repositioned the discipline on the frontlines of social justice through empowerment and liberation frameworks that seek to deconstruct the

racialized neoliberalⁱ structures that reproduce systems of power/privilege/oppression (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

Within liberation struggles, the contributions of young people have figured prominently. These movements and efforts are the focus of much empirical study that shape multidisciplinary perspectives on youth's social and political development. Examples include research on the positive development of young people from communities of color (Delgado & Staples, 2007; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2006; Hope & Jagers, 2014); empowerment among youth from low-income and working class communities (Diemer et al., 2010; Kornbluh, Ozer, Allen, & Kirshner, 2015); young girl's feminist identity development through engagement in activism (Taft, 2010); and critical consciousness among African American young men (Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). We add to these examples of sociopolitical development the experiences of women of color student activists within the racialized neoliberal university – a private and predominantly white institution characterized by a culture of colorblindness.

We argue that sociopolitical development must be theorized through an intersectional lens that centers the identities, subjectivities, and racialized and gendered positionalities of women of color student activists. Research on the sociopolitical development of student activists can contribute to a deeper understanding of how women of color with intersecting identities are pushing against racialized neoliberal regimes that render their contributions as insignificant or invisible. The oversight on the sociopolitical development of women of color is troubling because it limits deeper theoretical conceptualizations of sociopolitical development. Furthermore, this negligence leaves unexamined possibilities for supporting the sociopolitical development of women of color. Indeed, accounting for the experiences of women of color within inherently racialized neoliberal spaces is warranted, especially when considering that their lived experiences, agency, and social justice-oriented practices within sociopolitical development writings are sparingly theorized and empirically documented in community psychology.

In weaving together Black feminist thought with sociopolitical development theory, we document the sociopolitical development of women of color engaged in political activism, specifically student-led organizing. The question that guides this research, and constitutes the specific focus of this paper, includes the following: What experiences informed or catalyzed the sociopolitical development of women of color student activists within the racialized neoliberal university? We address this question through an analysis of the critical moments that facilitated their sociopolitical development. We also describe how we engaged a student-activist informed participatory action research (PAR) process that allowed us to document and support women of color student activists' sociopolitical development by identifying and describing their experiences.

In utilizing PAR as a tool to identify and facilitate sociopolitical development among women of color student activists, we are contributing to the emerging scholarship that seeks to trouble current sociopolitical development theorizing (Sánchez Carmen et al., 2015). Based on our analysis, we therefore posit that embodiments of difference, experiences with institutional racism, opportunities for critical intellectualism, and healing are all important triggers or dimensions of sociopolitical development. Indeed, discerning the experiences that shape sociopolitical development is necessary for liberatory and sustainable efforts in political activism. Therefore, the purpose of this manuscript is threefold. First, to contribute to the sparse, yet growing theoretical and empirical scholarship on the intersectional sociopolitical development of women of color student activists. Second, to center the voices of women of color student activists who describe the intellectual, social, embodied and emotional challenges of engaging in political activism within the neoliberal university. Third, to demonstrate the use of PAR as a political activism strategy that

aids in documenting sociopolitical development processes among and with women of color student activists. In addressing these goals, we are contributing to the sociopolitical development literature within community psychology and allied disciplines, as well as the body of work committed to advancing social justice-oriented theory, research, and action in post-liberal times of racialized neoliberalism.

Literature Review

Young people with intersecting positionalities on the margins of the *status quo* have been key political actors in bringing about social change in the United States. Much progress has been achieved within education institutions; from the 1954 school desegregation case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, wherein the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation as unconstitutional (Ladson-Billings, 1998), to the development of ethnic studies curricula and a federal court decision purporting that House Bill 2281, which banned ethnic studies (e.g., culturally-oriented, local/community-centered and socio-historical curricula), was unlawful (Depenbrock, 2017; Kelly, 2017). Indeed, there have been great strides toward racial justice and social progress, yet more needs to be realized to dismantle the racialized neoliberal structures that perpetuate capitalist immiseration.

Conceptualizing Sociopolitical Development

Within the context of community organizing, political activism is often characterized by concerted collective efforts, like direct actions and non-violent demonstrations. Various approaches have been proposed to conceptualize a social movement; yet, it is generally described by a collective of formal and informal networks that together strive to engage in organized sociocultural and political actions to effect structural change (Buechler, 1995). Within political activism, sociopolitical development has been identified as an important outcome.

Sociopolitical development theory is defined as a psychological process, characterized by a critical structural analysis of social conditions, and the political attitudes and behaviors enacted to address systemic issues (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003; Watts et al., 1999). Political activism is identified as an important context for facilitating youth's sociopolitical development, including their leadership, critical consciousness, and positive youth development (Diemer & Li, 2011; Watts et al., 2003). Sociopolitical development theory expands on conceptualizations of civic and political participation by considering the social and individual factors that shape agency, political efficacy, and self and collective determination among institutionally marginalized youth (Hope & Jagers, 2014; Watts et al., 1999). Via a sociopolitical development framework, scholars have documented how youth within and outside of educational institutions are reconstituting the conditions of their political engagement (Delgado & Staples, 2007; Ginwright et al., 2006).

Sociopolitical Development Within Political Activism

Youth community organizing has a long history in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Contemporary accounts from the 1960's liberation movements demonstrate that political activism has been, and still is, primarily led by young people (Hope & Jagers, 2014). For example, the Rainbow Coalition (RC), founded by Black Panther Party member Fred Hampton, was established as a multi-racial/multi-ethnic alliance to strategically unite and politically organize various ethnic and social groups (Rhoads, 2016; Williams, 2013). Much like other youth-led social movements, the RC mobilized the political power of youth and low-income working-class communities to address institutionalized racism and systemic inequities. The Black Panthers, Young Patriots and Young Lords, despite their differences,

came together to organize. These groups were united by their shared struggles for human and civil rights, racial justice, economic enfranchisement, and an end to police violence. Today, the power of youth activists remains unwavering before the preponderance of racism and injustice.

In the U.S., political activism aimed at redressing the racialized neoliberalism of institutions, like universities, is notably taking place. Students continue to organize to hold institutions accountable and responsive to their needs (Kezar, Acuña Avilez, Drivalas, & Wheaton, 2017; Kirshner, 2015; Rogers, 2012). In 1968 the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) student strike at San Francisco State University catalyzed a movement toward the implementation of ethnic studies curricula, and diversity initiatives in faculty and student recruitment and retention (Rhoads, 2016). A year later, at Cornell University, students organized similar actions to establish a Black Student Union and the first African American Studies program in the U.S. (Williamson, 1999). In effect, the Civil Rights Movement catalyzed the collective political power of youth and student activists within and beyond higher education.

Historical initiatives like the RC and TWLF demonstrate the power of youth striving to redress the pillaged conditions of their communities disenfranchised by the racialized neoliberal state. These forms of political activism attest to the sociopolitical development of young people, and also challenge hegemonic notions of young people as politically *apathetic* and disengaged (Watts et al., 2003). Then and now, youth and student from predominantly communities of color are at the forefront of social justice efforts. Youth of color, for example, often engage in extra-parliamentary forms of engagement meant to contest the *status quo* (Diemer & Li, 2011), or undertake non-traditional modes of political participation that transcend existing service and volunteerism models of civic engagement (Kirshner, 2015). Cultural movements involving art, like spoken word poetry, hip-hop, muraling and theater (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016), as well as the use of social media (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016) are more representative of the strategies and practices through which youth enact their political activism. These forms of engagement reflect contemporary social movements, like Black Lives Matter and the DREAMers movement (Conner & Rosen, 2016).

Black Feminist Thought: Intersectionality

Over the last half century, the concept of intersectionality has been used to describe the subjectivities and positionalities of Black women's experiences with race, gender and class discrimination. Intersectionality within Black feminist theory, therefore, unfolded out of collective efforts to center the voices and embodied subjectivities of Black women's lives. Informed by the work of bell hooks (1994), Collins (1990/2000), Crenshaw (1991), Lorde (1984), and the Combahee River Collective (1974/1982), among other Black scholars, writers and activists, Black feminist theory is a radical epistemological movement to center the intersectional subjectivities of Black women's lives, which were neither fully situated within the Civil Rights Movement, nor the (white) feminist movement. Grounded in Black feminist thought, and conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality posits that race and gender categories, along with other dimensions of positionality, are legible and have social, legal, political and economic implications. Intersectionality is a sociolegal theory that problematizes an "anti-discrimination regime that always presumes the mutual exclusiveness of race and gender" (Nash, 2013, p. 6). Intersectionality provides a theoretical lens for re-conceptualizing race beyond identity politics. In other words, instead of attending to the politics of difference, intersectionality describes the interlocking patterns of marginality in people's lives, and the race and gender structures that allow for matrices of oppression to remain (Collins, 1990/2000).

Drawing from Black feminist thought, this paper engages intersectionality in the process of documenting sociopolitical development among women of color student activists, many of whom identify as Black women. Given that

women of color student activists are engaged in transformative and powerful ways that differ, yet echo the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement, sociopolitical development theory must center intersectionality to better characterize the political activism that youth enact. Comparing past and contemporary social movements is beyond the scope of this paper; yet we refer to these accounts as examples of student organizing efforts within racialized neoliberal settings, such as institutions of higher education. Within a sociopolitical development framework that engages intersectionality, as purported in Black feminist thought, and through the use of PAR, we examined the experiences that catalyzed the sociopolitical development, and eventual political activism, of women of color student activists in a student-led movement called Unity IV.

Unity IV, which we describe more fully in the section below, is a university-based student-led movement to address institutional racism, and advocate for the implementation of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. The concerns raised by Unity IV student activists parallel the issues and demands made fifty years earlier by the TWLF. Although differences exist, the perpetuity of institutional racism continues, and is exacerbated by the racialized neoliberalism of education institutions in the U.S. Through this analysis we describe women of color student activists' sociopolitical development.

The Sociopolitical Justice-Oriented Citizenship PAR Project

Study Background

As a community-based researcher, trained in social-community psychology, I (Jesica) ground my work in a multi-disciplinary and intersectional study of race, age, gender and citizenship. My work follows a community-based PAR paradigm that involves developing community collaborations that are action-driven, social justice-oriented, and community-centered. These values lead me to use and share these skills with institutionally marginalized groups, most often students and young people of color.

In the spring of 2016 I was awarded a grant to continue my research on the *Sociopolitical Justice-Oriented Citizenship PAR Project*. The goal was to document the sociopolitical development of student activists within the Unity IV student-led movement at Claradise Universityⁱⁱ (CU) that began in the spring of 2015 in response to recurring incidents of racism on campus. I sought out student activists engaged in Unity IV and inquired about ways for us to collaborate, and how my research expertise in PAR could support their student organizing efforts. Four Unity IV student organizers (Jasmyne, Jaia, Madeline, and Rhyann) agreed to collaborate, and together we formed our PAR collective. In fall 2017 the assistant director to the Office for Multicultural Learning (Danielle) joined our team as a way to further our work in raising awareness about student of color experiences at CU and ways to support their needs, as well as help inform institutional changes for diversity, equity and inclusion.

As a collective of women of color with distinct positionalities within CU, and varied experiences in community organizing, we have all experienced in some form the intellectual, social, embodied, and emotional labor that is expended in political activism. Among student activists, their labor has been guided by efforts to resist racism via the co-production of knowledge, the documenting of their/our stories (e.g., data), and the co-creation of empowering spaces for them to heal and build community. Through a PAR process we have worked to produce research and actions that support the sociopolitical development, political activism, and healing of Unity IV student activists.

In this paper we therefore highlight our use of PAR as a tool in documenting and supporting the sociopolitical development of women of color student activists within the neoliberal university.

Research Setting: Claradise University and Unity IV

Claradise University is located in the Silicon Valley of California, one of the wealthiest yet most segregated and inequitable regions of the United States (Park & Pellow, 2004). CU boasts of a population of approximately five thousand undergraduate students. As a primarily white institution (51%), CU has strived to increase student demographic diversity over the past years. Although 47% of the student population consists of students of color, only 3% identify as African American or Black, and 18% identify as Latino/Hispanic. Indeed, the proportion of students of color remains marginal compared to the ethnic/racial and cultural diversity that characterizes the Silicon Valley. Despite the creative entrepreneurialism, technology innovation, and financial generativity produced in the region, the communities that are within and beyond CU are not exempt from social inequities. The Silicon Valley has a widening income gap, characterized by inflated housing market prices, a diminishing middle class, and growing poverty rates (Allen & Li, 2016). The area has been identified as one of the most unequal counties in the U.S. (Park & Pellow, 2004).

CU students have not been sheltered from experiencing injustices. From incidents of blatant racism on campus to everyday micro-aggressions within and outside of the classroom, these cumulative experiences severely impact students. To offer some context, the first student-led Unity movement at CU began in 1985 with six ethnic/cultural student organizations coming together to advocate for the establishment of a multicultural center for students. Over the past decades iterations of Unity movements have emerged, with Unity I in 1985 and most recently Unity IV in 2015. Unity movements have re-emerged in large part to raise awareness about student concerns, and to address the needs of students of color, LGBTQ students, and other under-represented students at CU.

Unity IV in particular was formed to raise awareness about the experiences, needs and struggles of Black and African American students at CU. One of the strategies Unity IV student activists employed was to convene quarterly campus wide forums, where university administrators, students, faculty, and staff gather to discuss diversity, equity and inclusion related initiatives to address the demands outlined in the Unity IV Statement. The Unity IV Statement consists of a list of twenty-one specific demands organized into four broad categories: academics, student and residential life, transparency, and recruitment and orientation. A specific demand within the Unity IV Statement was the creation of an Ethnic Studies Department and recognition as a standalone major. In the fall of 2016 the collective request of Unity IV student activists, Ethnic Studies faculty and students, and campus allies was met, thereby institutionalizing Ethnic Studies as an official department at CU. Despite this achievement, however, more demands remain to be fulfilled. Given the recurrence of Unity movements, a PAR project with student activists documenting their sociopolitical development within the context of the neoliberal university, was warranted.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

As a collective, we engaged PAR to document the sociopolitical development of women of color student activists. PAR is a research paradigm that involves an iterative process of reflection-action-transformation. Consistent with a research justice framework (Jolivéte, 2015), PAR allows for the democratization of knowledge by facilitating opportunities for critical consciousness, self-determination, shared decision-making, leadership, and civic engagement (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012). As a methodological orientation, PAR challenges conventional research

approaches by developing relationships of meaningful collaboration between researchers and community members in the process of conducting action research (Torre & Ayala, 2009).

The PAR process is characterized by four interconnected phases: 1) collaboration with community members to identify a topic, issue, or structural condition that allows for the problem to exist; 2) collection and analysis of data to learn more about the condition; 3) implementation of an action to address the problem; and 4) evaluation of the impact of the action, and whether it addressed the problem. PAR strives to problematize researcher-participant dynamics by fomenting values of transparency and shared decision-making, whilst emphasizing collaboration in every step of the research process (Torre et al., 2012). Through this process researchers and community members collectively identify a problem to address, and agree upon the best approach to bring about change. In partnership with communities who are most affected by social problems, PAR strives for a liberatory approach to research and action by centering the community's voice.

PAR in Practice: Our Process

We engaged PAR by collectively discerning a question informed by our experiences and interests in sociopolitical development, political activism, and healing. This led us to develop the broad question: What experiences informed or catalyzed the sociopolitical development of women of color student activists within the racialized neoliberal university? (phase one). To engage this question, we developed an interview protocol to help guide our interviews with Unity IV student activists at CU. We conducted a total of twenty interviews, each one lasting an average of sixty minutes, with a snowball sample of Unity IV student activists (phase two). Twenty interviews were conducted, however two of those interviews involved self-identified men of color, and eighteen self-identified women of color. Interviews were also conducted with members of our PAR research collective (Jaia, Jasmyne, Madeline, and Rhyann).

In the process of conducting the interviews it became evident that sociopolitical development was reinforced by and was also an important outcome of political activism. Sociopolitical development, although empowering, also led women of color student activists to experience an overwhelming socio-emotional burden. Our interviews indicated that while most activists were committed to their political activism, many of them were emotionally and physically depleted. The emotional labor and burnout they described in their interviews was attributed to their frustrations with the slow pace of progress to address the institutional racism, and colorblindness within the structure and culture of CU. To attend to the needs expressed by women of color student activists, and to support their healing toward sociopolitical wellbeing, we planned and implemented a one-day event, entitled the Quest for Unapologetic Emotional Emancipation is Now! (Q.U.E.E.N!) Retreat (phase three).

The Q.U.E.E.N! Retreat was informed by Lorde's concept of radical self-love "as an act of political warfare" (Lorde, 1984). Only a select number of women of color student activists were invited to attend the retreat. The purpose of the Q.U.E.E.N! Retreat was to provide women of color student activists with opportunities for healing through individual and collective reflections, dialogues, affirmation circles, writing tasks, and interactive community building activities for relational self-care. The retreat was also a response to the lack of socio-emotional support, and wellness resources available to women of color and student activists at CU. As a woman of color PAR collective the Q.U.E.E.N! Retreat constituted our action within a PAR process.

In line with efforts to re-think and re-imagine social justice activism in post-liberal times – which for us in the U.S. is marked by the heightened racialized neoliberalism of higher education – we have chosen to focus this paper

on our research outcomes from phases one and two of our PAR process. A discussion of these outcomes will allow us to explain the intersectional sociopolitical development of women of color student activists within the neoliberal university.

Data Analysis

Our data constitutes ethnographic fieldnotes of Unity IV meetings, forums and actions, as well as interviews. Given our use of Black feminist theory, our focus is on the eighteen interviews that involved women of color only. All data was analyzed through a thematic analysis approach, characterized by an inductive and deductive data analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that began with a close reading and re-reading of the data to discern patterns and themes. The discerned themes were then complemented and informed by the relevant literature on sociopolitical development (Diemer & Li, 2011; Hope & Jagers, 2014; Sánchez Carmen et al., 2015; Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002; Watts et al., 2003; Watts et al., 1999), as well as Black feminist theory, specifically intersectionality (Collins, 1990/2000; Combahee River Collective, 1974/1982; Crenshaw, 1991; Lorde, 1984; Nash, 2013). Through this thematic analysis procedure, we discerned four themes: embodiments of difference, experiences with institutional racism, critical intellectualism, and healing. The discerned themes correspond to and address our research question: What experiences informed or catalyzed the sociopolitical development of women of color student activists within the racialized neoliberal university?

Sociopolitical Development Among Women of Color Student Activist

Through a PAR process we documented the sociopolitical development of women of color student activists. In doing so, we discerned four themes that describe the experiences that informed and catalyzed women of color student activists' sociopolitical development within the neoliberal university. Below we highlight some of these outcomes.

Intersectionality in Embodiments of Difference

In using the term “embodiments of difference” we are calling attention to the multiple intersectional positionalities women of color, and Black women in particular, experience in the clashing of race and gender oppressions. Rooted in Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality theory, we posit that bodies are read and positioned on account of their perceived differences. These embodiments of difference shape the intersections of women of color's experiences, and determine which identities become most salient, and therefore are conceived as subordinate to the dominant group(s) (Collins, 1990/2000; Crenshaw, 1991).

The compounding accounts of race and gender oppressions made women of color student activists' intersectional positionalities most salient and central to their political activism. Women of color student activists reflected upon the ways their identities and bodies informed their embodied differences as students, women, people of color and activists. The markers of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and immigration status, among other categories, made visible their positionalities. That is, their embodied difference vis-à-vis the whiteness and colorblindness within the neoliberal university. Some of the experiences shared by women of color student activists included

feeling outcaste, hyper-visible and, in some cases, *invisible* in the classroom. These experiences are reflected in Angela's statement:

"Honestly my experience at [CU] from the beginning was very isolating, and I knew it had a lot to do with the Business School which is a predominantly white area. The school is predominantly white. But then also I'm a woman, I'm a Black woman, so that's like two things against me." (Angela, Interview)

Angela's response demonstrated the "clashing" of her intersectional positionalities as a visible Black woman within the neoliberal university. The isolating experience that Angela described highlights her racialized and gendered positioning within a predominantly white and presumably male space, such as the Business School. The recurrence of having to be made aware of these identities, embodiments, and positionalities of race and gender difference, within an ostensibly "white space," underscored Angela's sociopolitical development as a Black woman. In having to confront such struggles, Angela became aware of her embodied difference, and how this shaped the intersections of her positionality as a student activist.

Some of the interviewees described how CU rendered their intersectional positionalities and identities as being outside of the *status quo*. This point was demonstrated by Angela, and furthered by Ashley, who described her classroom experiences in the following way:

"I can walk into a classroom and not see anyone look like me and that's normalized for me and other people don't even have to notice that. I sat in my history class this week as we were talking about race and gender, and I was the only Black person in one out of four girls. To talk about race and gender and things like that - and that's what you're surrounded by - It's difficult when you're so aware of who you are all the time." (Ashley, Interview)

Ashley's positioning as a Black woman within a predominantly white space lacking diversity characterized her embodiment of difference; an experience she and many other women of color often experience (Collins, 1990/2000; Nash, 2013). In describing her experiences as a Black woman, Ashley reflected on the difficulty of always having to be seen, of having to be made "aware of who you are all the time." The taxation of embodied difference, of having to constantly be reminded of that, and yet must normalize the isolation of "not see[ing] anyone look like me [Ashley]," is a depleting experience. For many women of color, these moments were considered foundational in shaping their sociopolitical development. Furthermore, experiences characterized by the salience of their embodied difference were, by many student activists, also perceived as meaningful encounters to help them engage in political activism to claim and create spaces of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Institutional Racism in the Neoliberal University

Experiences with racism, micro-aggressions, and discrimination were unfortunately quite common among women of color student activists at CU. Yet these experiences were crucial to their sociopolitical development because it led them to confront the colorblindness within the neoliberal university that foreclosed opportunities for race-conscious dialogues. The onset of racist events that specifically targeted Black students at CU, challenged the presumed social justice values of the institution. In her interview Angela described the racist incident that catalyzed the student-led Unity IV movement in spring 2015:

"I always felt like I didn't have much of place here [CU]. Then what really shifted me was how I was going to confront these issues. The spring quarter I was with some girls from [Black Student Union] outside of a dorm hall, and we had an event where the men appreciate the women, and then the women have an-

other day to appreciate the men. And so we were delivering invitations to the guys that night. It was a Wednesday night, which is a known day for partying. We weren't being disruptive, but we weren't being quiet because everyone else was just as loud. We were outside in the quad area, and we were joking around, super excited because this is like the first event, especially for the first years. Then we heard people from the window yelling at us, telling us to shut up, to get off the lawn. We continued to talk because we were just as loud as everyone else. We were on Yik Yak, which is like a social media app where you're able to say something in I think 140 characters - And it's anonymous. And someone went on and said: 'Monkeys outside [residence hall], shut your watermelon eating mouths!' And we knew it was directed at us! One, because we were the only people in [residence hall], and two 'monkey' is very derogatory term to us Black people. Watermelon is also something that's used as a stereotype against Black people! So there was no way that they were targeting anyone else. We called campus safety, told them what happened, and I don't think much happened because they couldn't target who it was. From there Unity IV started and that's where I think a lot of people got a wake-up call about the racial climate on campus, and how no one else is going to stand up for us [Black students]. So we have to do it ourselves. That was really like a turning point." (Angela, Interview)

Angela described the incident that culminated in organizing the Unity IV movement. The incident, which was a typical occurrence and experience among students of color, reflected the culture of colorblindness and racism within the neoliberal university. For students of color, specifically those engaged in Unity IV, such incidents were considered symptomatic of broader issues tied to institutional racism within CU, as well as the racialized neoliberalism of higher education. Furthermore, because there were no explicit institutional consequences in place to hold students accountable for their racist speech or any explicit efforts to change the culture of the institution, these issues were seen as commonplace, yet deeply harming to students of color.

As explained by Angela, after reporting the incident to campus safety, the university administration was not able to discern who was responsible, and as a result no one was held accountable. The incident, along with the inadequate response by the university administration, led students like Angela to take action. Angela powerfully stated, "no one else is going to stand up for us. So we have to do it ourselves. That was the turning point." For Angela, like the other Black women who witnessed this and other incidents, racism was taking a toll on their sense of belonging, academic thriving and overall wellbeing as college students. The impact of everyday racisms on the health and psychological wellbeing of people of color are not a new phenomenon. Recent scholarship demonstrates that such recurring accounts of everyday racisms, from micro-aggressions to bigotry, have a detrimental impact on an individual's overall health (Lewis, Cogburn, & Williams, 2015; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). For students of color this can have a ripping impact in their capacity for meaningful learning and academic engagement (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

The recurring experiences of institutional racism produced critical shifts for women of color students specifically Black women at CU. The inadequacy or inability to individually challenge the culture of colorblindness within the neoliberal university, triggered Unity IV women of color student activists to come together and organize. Student experiences with institutional racism were deeply compounded by the inaction, slow pace of progress, and lack of transparency from the university administration on matters of diversity, equity and inclusion. The seemingly bureaucratic process in handling matters of institutional racism by the university administration, indicated for many women of color student activists a need for longer, more sustained efforts, within the Unity IV movement. Sociopo-

litical development within Unity IV political activism emerged as a reaction to manifestations of institutional racism that went unaddressed.

Critical Intellectualism

Sociopolitical development among women of color student activists, which was characterized by their embodiments of difference and experiences with institutional racism, was also shaped by their critical intellectualism. Conceptualized as a form of critical social analysis, critical intellectualism facilitates the capacity to discern the historical, social, political and structural factors that shape institutions, and consequently the conditions of structural marginality and disenfranchisement (Romero, 2015). For women of color student activists, sociopolitical development often began in the classroom and through quotidian college experiences that made salient their embodied difference and intersectional racialization, as evidenced in the above statements by Ashley and Angela.

Most women of color student activists were social science majors, and many had taken courses in sociology, ethnic studies, women and gender studies, as well as allied disciplines that centered on a structural analysis of systems of power and oppression. Therefore, some women of color student activists, like Yvonne, easily related their lived experiences to their academic curricula as a means to further, and also complement, her sociopolitical development.

“Part of my development as a student activist at [CU] had to do a lot with my course work. There’s a diversity requirement that all students have to fulfill and I took it in my freshman year. So grateful for doing that because it allowed me to see that there is this whole other aspect of the curriculum that doesn’t just focus on old white men and the history they want us to learn. There was an Ethnic Studies class that I took and I was just blown away because I was learning something that I was interested in. It was really empowering to learn about the history of my people.” (Yvonne, Interview)

Yvonne’s critical intellectualism, fostered by the personal and culturally relevant curricula, informed her sociopolitical development. Yvonne described her ethnic studies experience as important to her political activism within Unity IV because it allowed her to feel empowered about what she was learning. These critical intellectual connections furthered her radical wit to situate her lived experiences through an ethnic studies lens. In turn, this allowed her to de-normalize her intersectional racialized experiences as a Black woman. Reflecting on her classroom experiences, Yvonne claimed that “it was really empowering to learn about the history of my people.” Experiences such as these supported Yvonne’s sociopolitical development, specifically her capacity to analyze the socio-historical systemic conditions that have allowed for institutional racism in higher education to persist.

By applying course concepts and theories to their lived experiences, women of color student activists were able to see the relevance of what they were learning academically to their political work and thereby build their sociopolitical self-determination. The sociopolitical development reflected in Yvonne’s critical intellectualism empowered her to discern the best course of action to take to address the oppressions she experienced as a Black woman at CU. Several other student activists expressed the impact of ethnic studies, as well as women and gender studies, in shaping their critical intellectual understandings beyond mere academic knowledge and toward their development as sociopolitical actors and change agents. Sociopolitical development, fostered through opportunities for critical intellectualism often in relation to experiences of embodied difference produced by the structure of institutional racism, led women of color student activists to engage in political activism to challenge the neoliberal university.

Healing as (dis)Engagement in Political Activism

The desire for healing, wellbeing and emancipation from racism was a central theme that characterized women of color student activists' sociopolitical development. The significance of making space for love, care and healing within contexts of political activism is often understated (bell hooks, 2014; Lorde, 1984; Nash, 2013). Women of color student activists, despite their exhaustion and frustration with the slow pace of change within the neoliberal university, often expressed the need to "do the work" because no one else would. As reflected in Angela's statement, many women of color student activists approached healing as an intentional political act to resist and respond to racism in ways that allowed them to be seen and heard.

Healing within sociopolitical development was characterized by moments of individual and collective reflection, including the centering or troubling of one's most salient identities. Calliope's statement, for example, spoke of the importance of her activism work and how that unfolded into her identity as an activist:

"I value myself more as an activist and that's why I prioritize my activism more than my student work. At the end of the day, I suppose I look to the idea of lifelong learning. Before I saw my role as a student as a priority, but that work stays in the classroom - nothing changes. I'm like first and foremost a woman of color, and an activist more than a student. My activism helps me heal from my experiences as a student - As a woman of color." (Calliope, Interview)

Calliope reflected on her commitment to political activism, and her role as a student being second to her activism. In naming her identities as "a woman of color, and an activist more than a student," Calliope posited that it is through her political activism that she is able to engage in what she describes as "lifelong learning." Calliope's sociopolitical development, marked by her reference to activism as personal, social and political growth, also included fomenting a process of healing. Indeed, she described that through her political activism work she found a way to heal from her experiences of racism and sexism as a woman of color and a student.

In order care for and look after themselves, and others whose intersectional positionalities are also disenfranchised, women must often name their experiences of pain (Lorde, 1984). Black feminist writers, such as bell hooks (1994), Collins (1990/2000) and the Combahee River Collective (1974/1982), describe this as a process of seeing their struggles reflected in that of others, and building intersectional solidarities. Women of color student activists, like Calliope, understood the need to name their identities – those that gave them strength and caused them pain. Thus, women of color student activists' sociopolitical development was characterized by a process of healing from sources of pain, and was marked by experiences of being in solidarity with each other, as well as finding ways to care for themselves – even if that meant taking a pause from their political activism.

Indeed, there were instances where women of color student activists had to take a step back. In these moments, sociopolitical development was thus marked by their prioritizing of themselves. Healing through self-care was viewed as necessary to their sociopolitical wellbeing. Leah, for example, underscored this point:

"Organizing can become your entire life, so I am learning how to step back. I feel like I had endless energy last year and now I'm at the end. [...] We haven't done a very good job of teaching ourselves how to know when to pause and take care. We kind of re-expose people to trauma and we need to be a lot more careful about it - all of us. I only realize that because it has personally affected me." (Leah, Interview)

For Leah sociopolitical development was characterized by moments of solidarity with others, as well as the prioritizing of the self above their political activism. The intentionality of centering the self in the healing process described

by Leah, although individualistic, can render opportunities for relational healing that involve building intimate relations with one's self that allow for self-love, care, wellbeing and emancipation. Healing as engagement, or disengagement, from political activism was another characteristic of sociopolitical development among women of color student activists. As women of color student activists, both Calliope and Leah found ways to honor their true whole selves by naming and making space for their identities and needs.

Summary

Through a PAR approach we documented the experiences that informed and catalyzed the sociopolitical development of women of color student activists engaged in political activism within the neoliberal university. The experiences we identified as critical to their sociopolitical development included confronting the salience of their embodied differences, specifically within contexts of heightened institutional racism. Moreover, having access to spaces, such as classrooms, to deconstruct and unpack the institutional racism they faced was crucial to their sociopolitical development. For some women of color student activists, opportunities that allowed them to deconstruct, problematize and challenge the racism was critical, as it allowed them to heal from trauma, whilst build their political activism within Unity IV.

As a PAR collective, with many of us positioned differently within the neoliberal university yet committed to anti-oppression, racial justice and education equity, we sought to document the sociopolitical development of women of color student activists within Unity IV. We found strength in documenting their/our sociopolitical trajectories, while we critically examined the conditions that produced these within the structure of the neoliberal university. Through the rendering of women of color student activist's voices, we celebrate, honor and recognize their sociopolitical activism, as well as their struggles in challenging and seeking to transform the neoliberal university.

Conclusion

In unpacking some of the processes that characterize the sociopolitical development of women of color student activists within the neoliberal university, some noteworthy implications are discussed; specifically, as these tie in with efforts to re-think social justice-oriented activism and research in neoliberal and post-liberal times. First, research epistemologies and methods should attend to the intersectional embodiments of political subjects, and how they can participate in the co-production of knowledge. In this paper, we offered PAR as an approach to challenge positivist research epistemologies and the researcher-participant dynamics. Through the rendering of our PAR collective process, we have offered an example of a research justice project that centered the lived experiences of women of color student activists. To deconstruct racialized neoliberalism, new epistemologies and methods must be deployed to amplify the embodiments and subjectivities of those most affected by systems of power. Among women of color student activists, embodiments of difference were identified as important for facilitating their sociopolitical awareness, and eventual political activism within the neoliberal university.

Second, the resurgence of white supremacy, nativism, sexism, and homophobia in the U.S. has unearthed and amplified the institutional marginalization, and disenfranchisement of individuals and communities, especially of communities of color. Therefore, opportunities for critical intellectualism must be forged as a means to challenge the current neoliberal and post-liberal context that has fractured an embracing of and respect for difference and diversity. Among women of color student activists, critical intellectualism was facilitated by opportunities for critical

thinking and reflection where they were able to connect their lived experiences within historical accounts of struggle and resistance. These experiences made salient their embodied differences, and it also fostered their sociopolitical development. Critical intellectualism was central to women of color student activists' sociopolitical development, and was important in catalyzing their organizing to confront institutional racism within the neoliberal university.

Third, compounding experiences of oppression and disenfranchisement require attending to the sociopolitical wellbeing of those on the margins; in this case women of color student activists at a predominantly white institution. In this paper we have described healing as a process of sociopolitical development that aims to lessen the weight of having to carry one's struggles alone, and instead fosters self and collective care, as well as intersectional solidarity. Researchers, activists and practitioners engaged in the study of political movements should consider how research, theory and action can be developed to advance not only the political aims of social justice activism, but also to support the sociopolitical wellbeing of activists, among other marginalized individuals or communities working to redress systems of power.

Within community psychology in particular, efforts must be directed at understanding and examining what must be done within institutions of higher education to support, and bring to the fold the political activism of students, specifically of women of color and others with intersecting positionalities. The political activism of women of color student activists in Unity IV exemplifies contemporary social movements within and beyond the neoliberal university that seek to challenge the impending culture of colorblindness. Therefore, our role as researchers, educators, and social justice allies, must be to facilitate the sociopolitical development and collective power of communities disenfranchised by the *status quo*.

In this paper we have described our use of PAR as one approach toward documenting and supporting women of color student activists' sociopolitical development within the neoliberal university. For those of us who position our work as activist-scholarship, we must also use our privilege to make visible the contributions and efforts of those organizing within oppressive structures. In our case, women of color students within the neoliberal university. To sustain the democratic principles of social justice and civic engagement that underscore the purpose of higher education, we must support and amplify the political activism and sociopolitical wellbeing of students who are ultimately seeking to *de-neoliberalize* the university.

Notes

i) We use the term the "racialized neoliberalism" specifically in relation to higher education or universities, to describe settings that resemble market-driven institutions characterized by systems of governance and leadership employed within a corporate neoliberal model of profit and production. Within these technologies of capitalism and power, the racialized neoliberal university functions to maintain the *status quo*, whilst upholding ideologies of meritocracy, rugged individualism, and colorblindness that overlook the systemic institutional racism and whiteness embedded within higher education that forecloses educating for social transformation and racial justice.

ii) To maintain the confidentiality of all participants, we provide a pseudonym for interviewees, including interviewed members of our PAR collective. In the body of the paper we also offer a pseudonym for the university.

Funding

The first author, who is the principal investigator, received funding from the Santa Clara University Research Grant Office to support earlier planning, development and data collection for the research. Subsequently, two Faculty-Student Research Assistant Project (FSRAP) Grants were provided to the faculty member.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Unity IV student activists, as well as the participating student researchers and activists who contributed to this project. We also thank Santa Clara University's Faculty Research Development Office for their funding support, as well as the Ethnic Studies Department, the Office for Multicultural Learning, and the Office of Diversity & Inclusion for their support of the Q.U.E.E.N! Retreat.

References

- Allen, S., & Li, E. Y. (2016). *A look at Bay Area Poverty*. Retrieved from United Way Bay Area website: https://uwba.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Bay_Area_Poverty_Brief_June_2016.pdf
- bell hooks. (2014). *Teaching to transgress: Education as a practice of freedom*. New York, NY, USA: Routledge.
- Bennett, C. C., Anderson, L. S., Cooper, S., Hassol, I., Klein, D. C., & Rosenblum, G. (Eds.). (1966). *Community psychology: A report of the Boston conference on the education of psychologists for community mental health*. Boston, MA, USA: Boston University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Buechler, S. M. (1995). New social movement theories. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 36(3), 441-464. doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.1995.tb00447.x
- Collins, P. H. (1990/2000). The politics of Black feminist thought. In P. H. Collins (Ed.), *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (pp. 3-18). New York, NY, USA: Routledge.
- Combahee River Collective. (1974/1982). A Black feminist statement. In G. T. Hull, P. Bell Scott, & B. Smith (Eds.), *But some of us are brave*. Old Westbury, NY, USA: Feminist Press.
- Conner, J., & Rosen, S. M. (2016). *Contemporary youth activism: Advancing social justice in the United States*. Santa Barbara, CA, USA: Praeger.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241-1299. doi:10.2307/1229039
- Delgado, M., & Staples, L. (2007). *Youth-led community organizing*. Boston, MA, USA: Oxford University Press.
- Deppenbrock, J. (2017, August 22). Federal judge finds racism behind Arizona law banning ethnic studies. *NPR - All Things Considered*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/08/22/545402866/federal-judge-finds-racism-behind-arizona-law-banning-ethnic-studies>

- Diemer, M. A., & Li, C. H. (2011). Critical consciousness development and political participation among marginalized youth. *Child Development, 82*(6), 1815-1833. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01650.x
- Diemer, M. A., Wang, Q., Moore, T., Gregory, S. R., Hatcher, K. M., & Voight, A. M. (2010). Sociopolitical development, work salience, and vocational expectations among low socioeconomic status African American, Latin American, and Asian American youth. *Developmental Psychology, 46*(3), 619-635. doi:10.1037/a0017049
- Ginwright, S., Cammarota, J., & Noguera, P. (2006). *Beyond resistance! Youth activism and community change: New democratic possibilities for practice and policy for America's youth*. New York, NY, USA: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Harwood, S. A., Hunt, M. B., Mendenhall, R., & Lewis, J. A. (2012). Racial microaggressions in the residence halls: Experiences of students of color at a predominantly White university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 5*(3), 159-173. doi:10.1037/a0028956
- Hope, E. C., & Jagers, R. J. (2014). The role of sociopolitical attitudes and civic education in the civic engagement of black youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 24*(3), 460-470. doi:10.1111/jora.12117
- Hope, E. C., Keels, M., & Durkee, M. I. (2016). Participation in Black Lives Matter and deferred action for childhood arrivals: Modern activism among Black and Latino college students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 9*(3), 203-215. doi:10.1037/dhe0000032
- Jenkins, H., Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., & Zimmerman, A. (2016). *By any media necessary: The new youth activism*. New York, NY, USA: NYU Press.
- Jolivéte, A. J. (2015). *Research justice: Methodologies for social change*. Bristol, United Kingdom: Policy Press.
- Kelly, A. (2017, August 22). State ban on ethnic studies unconstitutional. *Arizona Public Media*. Retrieved from <https://news.azpm.org/p/news-topical-edu/2017/8/22/115686-state-ban-on-ethnic-studies-unconstitutional/>
- Kezar, A., Acuña Avilez, A., Drivalas, Y., & Wheaton, M. M. (2017). Building social change oriented leadership capacity among student organizations: Developing students and campuses simultaneously. *New Directions for Student Leadership, 2017*(155), 45-57. doi:10.1002/yl.20249
- Kirshner, B. (2015). *Youth activism in an era of education inequality*. New York, NY, USA: NYU Press.
- Kornbluh, M., Ozer, E. J., Allen, C. D., & Kirshner, B. (2015). Youth participatory action research as an approach to sociopolitical development and the new academic standards: Considerations for educators. *The Urban Review, 47*(5), 868-892. doi:10.1007/s11256-015-0337-6
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11*(1), 7-24. doi:10.1080/095183998236863
- Lewis, T. T., Cogburn, C. D., & Williams, D. R. (2015). Self-reported experiences of discrimination and health: Scientific advances, ongoing controversies, and emerging issues. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 11*, 407-440. doi:10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-032814-112728
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider*. Berkley, CA, USA: Ten Speed Press.
- Nash, J. C. (2013). Practicing love: Black feminism, love-politics, and post-intersectionality. *Meridians, 11*(2), 1-24. doi:10.2979/meridians.11.2.1
- Nelson, G., & Prilleltensky, I. (2010). *Community psychology: In pursuit of liberation and wellbeing*. London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Park, L. S.-H., & Pellow, D. N. (2004). Racial formation, environmental racism, and the emergence of Silicon Valley. *Ethnicities*, 4(3), 403-424. doi:10.1177/1468796804045241
- Rhoads, R. A. (2016). Student activism, diversity, and the struggle for a just society. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 9(3), 189-202. doi:10.1037/dhe0000039
- Rogers, I. (2012). *The Black campus movement: Black students and the racial reconstitution of higher education, 1965–1972*. New York, NY, USA: Springer.
- Romero, A. (2015). Critically compassionate intellectualism: The pedagogy of barriorganic intellectualism. In J. Cammarota & A. Romero (Eds.), *Raza studies: The public option for educational revolution* (pp. 14–39). Tucson, AR, USA: University of Arizona Press.
- Sánchez Carmen, S. A., Domínguez, M., Greene, A. C., Mendoza, E., Fine, M., Neville, H. A., & Gutiérrez, K. D. (2015). Revisiting the collective in critical consciousness: Diverse sociopolitical wisdoms and ontological healing in sociopolitical development. *The Urban Review*, 47(5), 824-846. doi:10.1007/s11256-015-0338-5
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69, 60-73.
- Taft, J. K. (2010). *Rebel girls: Youth activism and social change across the Americas*. New York, NY, USA: NYU Press.
- Torre, M. E., & Ayala, J. (2009). Envisioning participatory action research entremundos. *Feminism & Psychology*, 19(3), 387-393. doi:10.1177/0959353509105630
- Torre, M. E., Fine, M., Stoudt, B., & Fox, M. (2012). Critical participatory action research as public science. In H. Cooper & P. Camic (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (pp. 445-469). Washington, DC, USA: American Psychological Association.
- Watts, R. J., Abdul-Adil, J. K., & Pratt, T. (2002). Enhancing critical consciousness in young African American men: A psycho-educational approach. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 3(1), 41-50. doi:10.1037/1524-9220.3.1.41
- Watts, R. J., Griffith, D. M., & Abdul-Adil, J. K. (1999). Sociopolitical development as an antidote for oppression – Theory and action. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 27(2), 255-271. doi:10.1023/A:1022839818873
- Watts, R. J., Williams, N. C., & Jagers, R. J. (2003). Sociopolitical development. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 31(1-2), 185-194. doi:10.1023/A:1023091024140
- Williams, D. R., & Mohammed, S. A. (2013). Racism and health: Pathways and scientific evidence. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(8), 1152-1173. doi:10.1177/0002764213487340
- Williams, J. (2013). *From the bullet to the ballot: The Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party and racial coalition politics in Chicago*. Chapel Hill, NC, USA: UNC Press Books.
- Williamson, J. A. (1999). In defense of themselves: The Black student struggle for success and recognition at predominantly White colleges and universities. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 68, 92-105. doi:10.2307/2668212