

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE ON YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: A DEVELOPMENTAL AND LIBERATION PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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In this article, we take a critical look at the growing interest in U.S. political participation as it exists in the youth civic engagement literature. Our critique draws from principles of liberation and developmental psychology, and from the incisive writings of experts in youth organizing. Youth Organizing evolved from the Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Community Youth Development (CYD) perspectives but its addition of social justice activism is consistent with liberation psychology. The essence of our critique is this: Although there is certainly value in the current civic engagement literature, much of it focuses on the maintenance of social and political institutions rather than on action for social justice. To promote a better balance, and one more relevant to the lives of youth of color and other marginalized young people, we offer a framework for empirical research on youth sociopolitical development. The focus is on the relationship between social analysis (including critical consciousness) and societal involvement that includes the full range of service and political work. Because youth is the focus, we also include a brief discussion of a distinctive challenge that adults face in doing just work with young people—namely, adultism. © 2007 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in attention to civic participation among young people. For many adults, this focus is due to concerns about political disaffection in younger generations. Trends indicate that political participation measured with conventional indicators (voting, reading newspapers, etc.) has declined

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precipitously among younger generations in recent decades (Galston, 2001). These concerns have spurred lively interdisciplinary discussions as well as a variety of interventions. Some of these “solutions” treat youth as the problem. For example, in their review of primary prevention programs, Durlak and Wells (1997) found that 85% of the 177 interventions for children and adolescents targeted individuals rather than their environment.

Others, Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Community Youth Development (CYD), frame young people as a community resource and focus instead on providing opportunities for civic participation. In the CYD field, the voices of youth are central to the work, and they are taken very seriously. In fact, social change is thematic in two models of youth participation in the CYD field—youth-adult partnerships (Camino, 2000) and youth engagement in community evaluation research (Checkoway, Dobbie, & Richards-Schuster, 2003). However, in many of the writings on youth civic engagement and positive youth development, structural issues and inequities are rarely mentioned and maintenance rather than critiques of the status quo are a likely result. In our view, the field of CYD would benefit from the theoretical insights of liberation psychology.

LIBERATION PSYCHOLOGY, DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, AND YOUTH ACTIVISM

Liberation psychology is not new, nor is it a U.S. invention. It is a significant part of psychology, particularly in Latin America (Burton & Kagan, 2003). Nonetheless, psychologists of color, feminist psychologists, and community psychologists in the U.S. have made a number of significant contributions. One that is particularly important in discussing youth issues is the interplay of social power and wellness as described by Prilleltensky (2003). An analysis of power is essential for addressing impediments to wellness, and, once again, liberation psychology and developmental psychology are synergistic. Because social power operates through formative institutions such as schools, enhancing the well-being of young people must engage that power. Schools socialize children and shape the social theories and normative views that young people construct during the course of their development (Flanagan & Campbell, 2003).

We agree with the critique raised by PYD that the social sciences have been preoccupied with the “risks” youth pose both to themselves and to society. But we argue that there is rich theory in developmental and liberation psychology and a growing body of empirical work that points to the largely untapped potential of adolescents in the advancement of social values and political ideologies. Liberation psychology differs from conventional U.S. psychology in its emphasis on human rights and social equity. Exposing social injustice, creating just societies, promoting self-determination and solidarity with others, ending oppression (and healing its effects) are core tenets. Consistent with Prilleltensky’s (2003) framework for psychopolitical validity, the assumption is that addressing social ills enhances both collective and individual well-being.

Developmental psychology has traditionally emphasized individual growth and functioning; but, during the past several decades, there has been a greater appreciation for the ways that individual development is contextualized (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The field has come to appreciate that grappling with civic issues is an integral piece of consolidating identity in adolescence (Youniss & Yates, 1997), and civic/political development has now taken its place as a core theme in the field (Flanagan,

2004). Combining these new directions in developmental psychology with themes from liberation psychology generates testable hypotheses about the political sensitivities of the period of *youth*, which we define in this article as the years spanning mid-adolescence through the middle of the third decade of life.

The combination of developmental and liberation psychology also pushes the civic engagement envelope by critiquing the youth development field's overemphasis on individual outcomes at the expense of its attention to collective experiences and the power of collective voice. For instance, identity—social as well as personal—is focal during the adolescent and young adult years. In the course of deciding what values they stand for and what ideologies they endorse, young people look for a concordance between their views and those of others, including individuals, organizations, and groups. Our critique of the positive youth development perspective is that it has paid little attention to structural barriers to youth participation. Because community institutions mediate the relationship between individuals and the state (i.e., schools, the police, etc.), those institutions can empower some youth while marginalizing or even oppressing others. We think that the PYD field is well poised for a next phase that includes a focus on structural barriers to positive youth development. Already leaders in the field have pointed to options for changing youth policies such that they could facilitate a PYD agenda (Pittman, Yohalem, & Irby, 2003), and they have noted the importance of political will and of building a political base from the extant constituencies that care about young people (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 1997).

From Social Integration to Action for Social Justice

Traditional thinking in psychology is certainly not the only reason for the overvaluing of system maintenance in the youth civic engagement literature. Classic political socialization theory (Easton & Dennis, 1969), concerned with the mechanisms underlying political stability, assumed that adult agents passed on to the younger generation a set of principles that sustained the system. Implicit in this analysis is an investment in or identification with the prevailing social order and an emphasis on the replication of things as they are. Less attention is paid to politics as a contestation of views. As Kum Kum Bhavnani (1991) observed in her ethnographic study of British working class youth, politics implies contestation as well as regulation of social life. Furthermore, as generational replacement theorists have shown, engagement of younger generations and replacement of their elders in the political process is a source of political *change* (Delli Carpini, 1989). An emphasis on societal replication also obscures the differences in perspective that comes with social diversity: Are young members of marginalized groups as likely as more socially integrated youth to replicate or buy into a system where they feel excluded? Finally, the vertical (intergenerational) model of political socialization gives scant attention to the role of peers in political development and the significance of collective voice in politics. It fails to acknowledge that political change occurs when people see their shared interests and work together on common goals.

A more dynamic model of youth civic engagement would appreciate that there are multiple ways in which youth incorporate in the body politic. A good example is provided by Westheimer and Kahne (2003) who note that our image of the “good citizen” can be framed in three ways: (a) as the personally responsible citizen who demonstrates citizenship through individual acts such as volunteering; (b) the participatory citizen who engages in local community affairs and stays current on local and

national issues; and (c) the justice-oriented citizen who, like the participatory citizen, emphasizes collective work towards community betterment while maintaining a more critical stance on social, political, and economic issues. In this third image, it is clear that a thoughtful interrogation of authority is essential to good citizenship. Furthermore, as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States or the struggle against apartheid in South Africa showed, acts of civil disobedience can be marks of committed citizens.

Youth organizing focuses on the justice-oriented citizen described by Westheimer and Kahne and is most closely aligned with a liberation perspective. However, there is little written about youth organizing in psychology perhaps because it is sometimes at odds with both treatment *and* prevention perspectives. According to Listen, Inc. (2000), community organizing grew out of PYD, where “Many youth workers had grown critical of prevailing prevention models, which in their view compartmentalized youth based on pathologies. These critics argued for a more holistic framework, one that focused on educational, artistic, and physical development” (p. 6).

Authentic Youth-Adult Partnerships

Seeing young people as immature or psychologically disordered poses a serious barrier to authentic collaboration. Although we all claim to value children, we simultaneously maintain “. . . a series of interlocking discourses which serve to problematize and marginalize children” (Roche, 1999, p. 475). When speaking about teenagers, we sometimes uncritically accept as truth terms that would easily be seen as derogatory stereotypes if applied to other social groups—terms such as immature, impulsive, self-centered, naïve, reckless, and silly. Although it is obvious that derogatory stereotypes provide a rationale for racism, sexism, and the like, it can be more difficult to see our views about young people as the basis of “adulthood”—a word that is not yet in English dictionaries.

Neither CYD nor youth organizing make adults irrelevant to, or an enemy of, the enterprise, but they do imply new roles for adults. Rather than “leading,” adults need to be in the background, monitoring, mentoring, facilitating, but not being in charge. Young people want support from adults in the form of dialogue, coaching, and providing connections to sources of institutional, community, and political power (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). When adults look for assets rather than deficits, they will likely see young people’s energy, enthusiasm, and may even notice constructive aspects of youthful risk-taking (which is often framed as a problem in the literature on adolescence). Perhaps because adolescents insist on authenticity, Zeldin and his colleagues find that their involvement brings both the adults and the organization back to its core values (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000). For example, at several points in the decades of struggle against apartheid in South Africa, youth rejuvenated organizations such as the African National Congress, and they often advocated militant action (Ngomane & Flanagan, 2003).

Rather than being limited to a therapeutic approach to social problems (in which youth are the targets of intervention), more proactive approaches such as youth organizing focus on the roots of social problems, empowerment, and the capacity to identify, analyze, and act on issues relevant to youth. The psychological processes related to critical consciousness, an awareness of oppression, and liberation behaviors are consistent with the subject matter of liberation psychology.

An Example of Youth Organizing For some, it is hard to believe that young people can lead a successful movement for social justice against powerful adults who are reluctant to acknowledge their concerns. For that reason, and to illustrate the power of a liberatory perspective for both social change and youth development, we offer the following example that has been adapted almost verbatim from HoSang (2001):

Seventeen-year-old Sadeelah Muhyee and student leaders at the Oakland-based nonprofit Kids First! led a coalition that organized hundreds of students, parents, and elected officials in a year-long effort to persuade the regional transportation district to provide free bus passes for students who qualify for subsidized lunch programs. Thanks to their efforts, the district slashed fares for all other youth in half, and it is now aggressively promoting these reduced price monthly bus passes, which could reach an additional 70,000 students in the two-county area. Muhyee joined Kids First!, a five-year-old citywide youth organizing and empowerment group, because she wanted to force policy-making adult bodies to take action on youth issues. “Public education is supposed to be free,” Muhyee says. But she and many of her Oakland High School classmates were shelling out \$27 a month for a bus pass just to get to class. That’s more than \$700 per year for a family with three students, and Muhyee said that by the end of the month, she saw more empty seats in class as families had to choose between groceries and bus fare.

Working from a modest second-story office overlooking the heart of a still struggling downtown Oakland, Kids First! organizers planned the myriad press conferences, petitions, and mobilizations to public meetings that ultimately forced the reluctant hand of transit officials. The final public meeting to decide the issue was scheduled at 10 AM on a school day. Undeterred, the students secured parental permission slips for hundreds of students from across the city, and even got several school buses from a supportive school board member, to ensure the students would be heard. Their victory is impressive on many counts. The students won a remarkable \$2 million annual outlay for the program in a period of fiscal belt-tightening. Not only are up to 100,000 students eligible for free or reduced passes in the 400 square-mile area, but the school district itself is anticipating hundreds of thousands of dollars in increased reimbursements from the state as a result of improved attendance. At a time when most school reform measures are focused entirely inside the classroom, the youth organizers made a persuasive argument that poverty recognizes no such boundaries—the pocket book can matter as much as the text book. Finally, the students taught and received an important lesson in collective power and expression. “We knew that they would only listen to us if we had numbers—and that’s what we did,” Muhyee said. (p. 1–2)

According to HoSang (personal communication, March 1, 2004), who was a founder of Kids First! and a board member at the time of the campaign discussed above, adults in the organization were consultants and facilitators with two broad aims in mind. The first aim related to the objectives of the campaign: Adults provided technical assistance on the particulars of transportation policy and other topics requiring specialized expertise. They researched issues, helped to frame the campaign, developed relationships with potential allies based on their networks as community organizers, and performed various staff support functions. Many of these consulting functions are the

same functions they would provide for adult-led organizations. Their second aim was youth development: The adults often offered exercises designed to address the “politics of internal transformation” (which includes personal socio-emotional development) as well as exercises intended to advance critical consciousness in the sociopolitical realm. Many of the adults had backgrounds in community organizing coupled with a long-standing interest in youth development. Others were more traditional youth development workers politicized by policies and initiatives in California that they saw as having an adverse effect on youth. This front-line work described by HoSang embodies the closer integration of PYD and community organizing that we are proposing in this article. Readers who are interested in more examples of successful youth activism are urged to consult the Youth Activism Project (2004) where over 80 youth-led campaigns are documented at last count.

Youth Sociopolitical Development

Social analysis is a critical element in youth organizing for social change. This section develops this and related ideas as a part of sociopolitical development (SPD) theory. Youth sociopolitical development is a product of both liberation and developmental psychology. It is the evolving, critical understanding of the political, economic, cultural, and other systemic forces that shape society and one’s status in it, and the associated process of growth in relevant knowledge, analytical skills, and emotional faculties (see Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003). SPD is no more ancillary to collective human development than is moral development, so it ought to occupy a similar status. Figures like Gandhi, Mandela, M.L. King, Jr. and Aung San Suu Kyi all point to the intersection of morality and political liberation, so the comparison is more than an analogy.

PYD, CYD, and youth organizing offer highly pragmatic models for youth-adult partnerships for social justice work. Liberation psychology can extend the challenge that these approaches pose to conventional scholarly thinking on treatment roles, psychopathology prevention, and societal replication. Toward this end, we offer a framework for empirical research on youth activism that emphasizes liberation. As shown in Figure 1, there are four components: (1) Worldview and social analysis, of

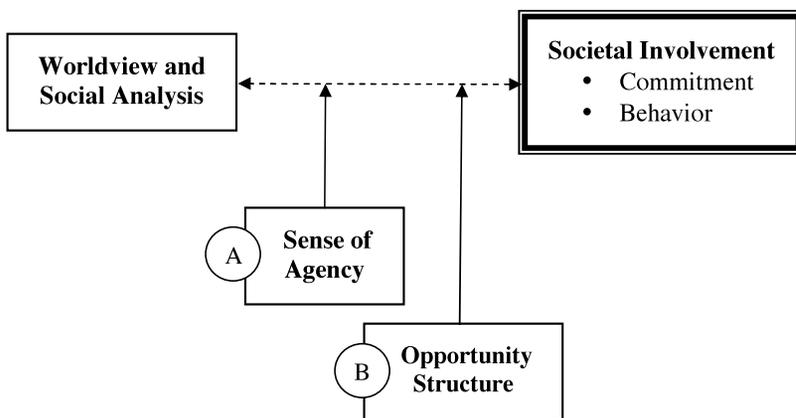


Figure 1. Potential moderators in a theory of sociopolitical development.

which critical consciousness is a central part, (2) Sense of Agency, which is empowerment and efficacy (self, collective, political), (3) Opportunity Structure, which takes into account the resources available to shape and permit action based on one's analysis, and (4) Societal Involvement Behavior (SIB). SIB—the principal outcome of interest—can be community service, civic engagement, or sociopolitical activism. Sociopolitical activism is the type most closely aligned with liberation because of its emphasis on systems change and social justice.

Worldview and Social Analysis

Ginwright (2002) developed a conceptual framework for social analysis based on critical consciousness theory. It provides the best integration to date of work by activists, scholars, and practitioners. Research by Watts & Guessous (2006) uses the *Just World Belief* construct in the social psychology literature to operationalize critical consciousness. Several versions of the scale are in use, but they all tap beliefs about the relative contributions of personal behavior and social forces on social conditions. In effect, Just World Beliefs are the outcome of an individual's Social Analysis. A micro view attributes social conditions to the talents (or shortcomings) of individuals. A macro view emphasizes the influence of ineffective or oppressive social institutions on social conditions. It is likely that social analysis is a component of "Belief in a just world refers to a person's need to see the world as a place in which people get what they deserve and deserve what they get" (Zuckerman & Gerbasi, 1977 p. 357). Research on the construct has tied belief in a just world to blaming the poor for their fate (Furnham & Gunter, 1984), while a rejection of just world beliefs has been tied to the view that world economic systems contribute to Third World poverty, exploitation, and war (Harper & Manasse, 1992). political ideology, be it conservative, liberal, capitalist, socialist, or nationalist.

It is tempting to predict that the "disadvantaged" will take macro view and blame *The System* more than those who are privileged, but it is not at all inevitable that those who are most oppressed by a system will notice its flaws. In fact, in their studies of adolescents' theories about inequality Flanagan and Tucker (1999) found that it was youth from more privileged communities who were more likely to feel that the system was flawed (albeit not for them). In contrast to privileged youth with a safety net of second chances, poor and working class youth are aware that it is only through dint of their own hard work that they can get ahead. In a similar vein, Faison and Flanagan (2003) compared how parents in African-American and White families interpreted the social contract to their children. Not only was the imperative of self-reliance (you have to rely on yourself because society isn't going to take care of you) higher in African-American families, this imperative of self-reliance was more strongly correlated with taking care of others and keeping up on current events than it was in White families. The authors interpret their finding as an indication that racial socialization is a form of political socialization, i.e., as African-American parents prepare their children to deal with prejudice, they are interpreting how the political order works for people "like us." Thus, an ethnoracial worldview can be the basis of social analysis as easily as the sociopolitical attributions of just world beliefs.

Since Cross (1971) published his theory of "Negro-to-Black-Conversion," links between ethnoracial and sociopolitical development have been evident, but they have not been an explicit part of any program of research. Like political ideologies, an ethnoracial or cultural worldview includes a shared system of meaning that is transmitted

within and across generations. Jagers, Mattis, and Walker (2003) proposed the idea of *Racialized Cultural Identity (RCI)* to describe a politicized conception of race that combines Black Nationalism and African American cultural traditions. Race is included in RCI because oppression based on salient social attributes (in this case, racism) can be among the earliest personal experiences children have with political power and with the utility of a macro view. As for the cultural aspect of RCI, *communalism* is among the most relevant concepts for understanding the intersection of culture and social analysis. Communalism privileges the fulfillment of social duties and responsibilities and places a premium on the interconnectedness, interdependence, and well-being of one's group (Boykin, Jagers, Ellison, & Albury, 1997).

Sense of Agency as a Moderator

In the presence of an opportunity structure for action, why are there "armchair activists" who possess an analysis of social problems but decline to take action? Questions about the relationship between social analysis and societal involvement behavior are literally at the center of our framework for sociopolitical development. One of the candidates for a moderating role between analysis and action shown in Figure 1 is "sense of agency." This could be one or more of the many versions of efficacy (personal, political, collective) or of empowerment. The empowerment literature in community psychology has produced a number of variants of this construct, which Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) defined as "... a combination of self acceptance and self confidence, social and political understanding, and the ability to play an assertive role in controlling resources and decisions in one's community" (p. 726). There have been no direct tests of the moderating effects of agency on sociopolitical behavior, but recent research by Laird (2003) found that abortion activists reported feeling greater sociopolitical control than nonactivists.

In contrast to the emphasis on self-efficacy in the service learning field, collective efficacy, and collective identity are prominent themes in the youth organizing literature.

Collective efficacy implies a belief in the capacity of the group to pull together and realize shared aspirations or address shared problems (Bandura, 2001, Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). As such, collective efficacy reflects a faith in others, a belief that they share a commitment to a common purpose. Although collective efficacy has not been a prominent construct in psychology, there is considerable empirical evidence from psychology about the dynamics underlying collective action. According to experimental studies, when individuals identify with a group they are more willing to forego individual gain in order to enhance the collective good (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

Opportunity Structures

Theories in sociology and political science that explain societal involvement stress the importance of opportunity structures (Keeter, 2002). The argument is that a young person's potential for societal involvement is strongly influenced by the availability of meaningful and desirable opportunities for action in their community. It is important to remember that opportunity structure includes more than settings and roles—it includes people in an organization that recruit and mentor those who might not otherwise become involved. Community psychology has long understood the importance

of opportunity structure as a feature of schools and other social environments (e.g., Trickett, Kelly, & Todd, 1972).

Along with sense of agency, opportunity structure is a potential moderator of the relationship between social analysis and societal involvement behavior. Inequities in civic participation opportunities are due in part to the disproportionate number of community-based youth organizations and after school activities available in more privileged communities (Hart & Atkins, 2002). National studies indicate that 29% of early adolescents are not reached by community youth programs at all (U.S. Department of Education, 1990) and that in disadvantaged communities, resources are not ample to sustain programs (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). Among adults in the United States, social class and political participation are stubbornly linked. The better educated, better paid, and better connected are more likely to participate in part because schools and jobs are settings where people get recruited into civic activities and because middle-class parents are more likely to model and encourage civic engagement in their children (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Opportunities via faith-based groups to practice organizational and leadership skills and to be recruited into civic action are one of the few ways that lower SES citizens overcome these class disparities (Verba et al., 1995).

Longitudinal work suggests that social disparities in the pathways to civic participation begin in childhood. Children (especially males) from single-parent families are less likely to be connected as teens to religious institutions in their communities and less likely as adults to be engaged in community voluntarism (Lichter, Shanahan, & Gardner, 2002). Class disparities in voting as a young adult can be traced to similar disparities in participation in extracurricular activities as early as the eighth grade (Smith, 1999). Even when community-based organizations are available, their practices may actually marginalize some young people by insisting that they assimilate to a majority culture.

In addition to these “hard” barriers to societal involvement, there are a number of “soft” impediments. Police practices that lead to disproportionate numbers of ethnic minorities in the criminal justice system (Hagan & Albonetti, 1982) undermine democracy by pitting youth against the societal institutions (increasing their disaffection) or by erecting barriers between adults and youth. Likewise, education—the supposed great equalizer for participation—is riddled with inequalities that result in differential outcomes by and reinforce the inequities of social class (Hochschild, 2003). The structural barriers and uneven opportunities for different groups of youth to participate in the civic and political process raises questions about the discrepancy between ideal and real-world democracy, challenges which the positive youth development field has yet to grapple with.

Societal Involvement: Commitment and Action

In the model proposed here, one outcome of sociopolitical development is societal involvement in its various forms, which then (re)informs social analysis. Leading scholar of liberation such as Freire (1990) and Martin-Baro (1994) argue that the action-reflection cycle is central to political development.

On the face of it, measuring societal involvement is fairly straightforward—an inventory of possible societal involvement behavior: community service (learning), civic activity (conventional involvement in social and political institutions), and unconventional, extra-institutional sociopolitical action. As noted earlier, Pancer, Pratt and

Hunsberger's (2000) behavioral scales exist to measure this. However, in reality it is necessary to do more than count instances or frequency of involvement to understand SPD. A number of researchers have found that the *role* young people have in a project influences its impact on their lives. Empowering roles appear to be important. Research by Morgan and Streb (2001) indicates that "student voice" in a project is essential. They describe four items for assessing this, to which students should answer "yes": "I had real responsibilities," "I had challenging tasks," "I helped plan the project," and "I made important decisions." Findings from this research further support the idea that a sense of agency must be considered as both an antecedent and as an outcome of societal involvement. The importance of having a voice, having real responsibility, and having one's opinion taken seriously is consistently found in the service learning and civic and community youth development literature as a key in generating young people's interest and maintaining their commitment to the work or the organization. (See Flanagan, 2004 for review.)

Some researchers have attempted to classify the types of societal involvement conceptually or in a way that is helpful for youth program development. Camino and Zeldin (2002) identified five "pathways" to youth civic engagement: public policy/consultation (advising adult decision makers), community coalition involvement, youth in organizational decision making (adult-youth partnering in community-based orgs), youth organizing and activism, and school-based service learning. Stoneman (2002) describes a simpler three category scheme: project creation, institutional governance, and issue-based advocacy. In their research on young activists, Watts et al. (2002) operationalized the work of activists in terms of strategies and tactics. There is no compelling empirical rationale for choosing one typology of activism over another. We prefer the following three distinctions, which we made previously: (1) traditional community service activities that reduce stress by providing aid to individuals; (2) civic engagement that involves conventional work in local, state and national organizations and political work in the dominant political parties, and (3) sociopolitical activism. Sociopolitical activism is the one most closely associated with liberation behavior: it includes work for social justice, community organizing, and "extra-institutional" action involving initiatives launched from outside of conventional institutions (Corning & Myers, 2002).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have taken a critical look at the growing interest in U.S. political participation as it exists in the youth civic engagement literature. The critique combined ideas from developmental and liberation psychology—much of which is outside the scholarly mainstream. It was all part of an effort to expand notions of civic development to include social change and social justice activism and to expand the role social analysis, empowerment, and other political ideas play in researching societal involvement. Although there is certainly value in the current literature, much of it focuses on the *maintenance* of social and political institutions. As scholars have pointed out, short of a revolutionary process, society must find the proper balance (not necessarily in the middle!) between conflict in the interest of justice and unity in the interest of stability. The literature has yet to do this.

Rhetoric about social justice is easy, but if a liberation psychology perspective is to occupy a larger space in community psychology, the discourse must extend to an agenda for action scholarship. We drew from existing empirical research on civic

engagement and from theory and research in developmental psychology to develop some testable theoretical propositions that put the interplay of *social analysis* and *societal involvement* at the center of sociopolitical development research.

Because our population focus was youth, we touched on the distinctive challenges adults face in working with young people. Liberation psychology calls for participatory action research methods in the investigative process and authentic partnerships between adults and youth. The creation of opportunity structures—roles and settings—where youth and adults can share power is an ideal area for involvement by both community and developmental psychologists—once we have pushed the envelope to include social justice.

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