LINKING YPAR AND YOUTH SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT: REFLECTIONS ON A SOCIAL MEDIA PHOTOVOICE STUDY WITH YOUTH ORGANIZERS

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Abstract

Sociopolitical development (SPD) is the process by which youth develop knowledge, skills, and capacity for critical social and political action. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) has been theoretically linked to critical consciousness and SPD models. However, the specific mechanisms linking the YPAR process and youth SPD are not well documented. With the aim of clarifying this relationship, ten adolescent researchers/community organizers were interviewed. They reflected on specific ways the YPAR process affected their SPD, including critical awareness, analysis, ideological development, burnout, critical dialogue, community organizing, and more. This paper reports these insights using in vivo coding and a process analysis approach. The findings give insight into YPAR implementation and generate ideas for youth programming/intervention.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) has been increasingly cited as a possible context for youth sociopolitical engagement and a tool for fostering youth sociopolitical development (SPD) (Kennedy et al., 2019; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Seider et al., 2021). However, the mechanisms or processes linking YPAR with youth SPD are poorly understood. Guided by the questions of whether and how the YPAR process contributed to SPD, this paper aims to help clarify those links by drawing from adolescent YPAR researchers who participated in a six-month-long social media photovoice project. This paper qualitatively explores and illustrates the links between some specific YPAR processes/practices and youth SPD processes/practices.

Youth Sociopolitical Development

Sociopolitical development (SPD) is the process of acquiring skills, knowledge, emotional faculties, and capacity for acting against systems of oppression (Hope & Bañales, 2018; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Watts et al., 2003). Adolescence is a critical time for SPD as many young people make essential developments in their belief systems, develop more nuanced understandings of systems of oppression, and build their patterns for system justification, or the degree to which people are motivated to defend and justify the status quo (Godfrey et al., 2019; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). SPD is also associated with civic activism (Watts et al., 2011) and voting behaviors in adulthood (Diemer & Li, 2011). It is critical for the health and sustainability of civic activism and social movements that aim to address pervasive racial, economic, and other social inequalities in the United States. Numerous empirical studies have linked positive SPD with positive racial identity development and healing from racist trauma for Black youth (Ginwright, 2010; Hope & Spencer, 2017; Watts et al., 1999). Additionally, a high sense of sociopolitical control (i.e., beliefs about one's capabilities and efficacy in social and political systems) was associated with fewer adverse mental health outcomes (Zimmerman et al., 1999; Christens & Peterson, 2012). Studies have also shown that youth who have greater levels of critical consciousness also have a better understanding of their career aspirations and interests, higher motivation levels, higher levels of community engagement, and lessened risks of adverse psychosocial outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, struggling academic performance) (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Stewart et al., 2008; Pillen et al., 2020).

Youth SPD and YPAR

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach to knowledge production that seeks to understand the world by transforming it. It has been identified as a tool for critical consciousness development and civic engagement—both of which are central to SPD. While PAR can include a variety of methodologies, it maintains an embedded critique of colonization, racism, homophobia, classism, misogyny, and xenophobia in society, our research, and ourselves (Tuck et al., 2008; Torre, 2014). PAR (1) understands "expert validity" and "construct validity" to live with people who experience oppression, and not just those who have gained knowledge through professional training alone; (2) believes it is not conducted by lone investigators, but rather by a collective of 'insiders' and stakeholders; (3) centers issues of power and oppression in subject matter, and process; and (4) understands knowledge production as being inextricably linked to interacting with the world around us (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

   In the case of PAR with youth (YPAR), there is an acknowledgment that children and young people make up a social and political class that is pushed to the margins. YPAR asserts that youth have important insight and expertise into the social and political world and should be positioned as knowledge producers and decision-makers on the issues that impact their lives (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Langhout & Thomas, 2010).

As a result of YPAR, youth gain a broader and deeper awareness of social justice issues and are given opportunities to form an understanding of themselves in relation to the social world. This includes developing their political power and potential for being change agents (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). Research has suggested that YPAR may be a strategy for facilitating critical consciousness and community action (Kennedy et al., 2019; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). Theoretical models cite approaches like YPAR, combined with social justice curricula and one's sense of efficacy, as necessary for youth SPD (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Seider et al., 2021). However, the alignment between YPAR and SPD has primarily been axiological and epistemological, with each field being rooted in theories of critical consciousness, anti-oppressive ideology, and a commitment to taking critical action. Very little published literature explicitly explores the mechanisms and processes linking YPAR and youth SPD (Malorni et al., 2023).

Current Study

This study draws from the reflections of ten youth researchers (ages 14–19) who completed a YPAR study of the relationship between social media and youth SPD. As part of the YPAR project, the YPAR collective constructed a conceptual framework for youth SPD that included cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social or relational domains. They named these SPD domains 'Thinking,' 'Doing,' 'Feeling,' and 'Relating' (outlined further in the results section). At the end of the project, the youth researchers reflected on how the YPAR process affected these SPD domains. This paper outlines some of their reflections and helps us link the processes within the YPAR process to youth SPD.

Methods

First, I will outline the central methods and processes of the original YPAR project. This is important for contextualizing the youth researchers' reflections. Then, I will introduce the methods used to analyze youth and facilitator reflections linking the YPAR project to youth SPD.

YPAR Project Methods

The YPAR collective employed a photovoice methodology. Photovoice is founded on feminist and critical principles and is cited as a tool for critical consciousness development (Wang et al., 2000; Wang & Hannes, 2020; Carlson et al., 2006), one of the key elements of youth sociopolitical development.

Recruitment. The YPAR project used a snowball sampling approach. An electronic flyer was distributed to greater Seattle and South Puget Sound youth-led organizations. An online application asked youth to self-report basic demographic information, describe their civic or community engagement experience, discuss what social justice issues are important to them, and why they wanted to participate in the study. Once a few youth researchers were enrolled, they were invited to recruit others they thought would be a good fit for the project. All youth

were compensated $25 per hour for their participation. The study was IRB-approved. Youth over 18 completed written consent forms, and youth under 18 completed written assent forms with parent permission. Verbal consent was conducted continuously throughout the project, before each research activity.

The adolescents who participated in the project were diverse in age, organizing experience, race, ethnicity, home language, gender, and socioeconomic status. Participants were ages 14 (n = 2), 15 (n = 2), 16 (n = 2), 17 (n = 1), 18 (n = 1), and 19 (n = 2). Genders include cis women (n = 4), transmasc (n = 1), gender fluid (n = 1), non-binary (n = 2), and cis men (n = 2). Races, as reported in their own words, include Asian (n = 2), biracial AfroLatina (n = 1), white (n = 3), Black (n = 1), white Latine (n = 1) multiracial: Black, white & Desi (n = 1), and biracial Asian & white (n = 1). First languages included English, Spanish, Cantonese, Somali, and Vietnamese. Four youth came from middle-class families, and six identified as coming from working-class families. Three young people live with a disability or identify as disabled. Pseudonyms have been used for each youth researcher in this paper. The author is the facilitator of the YPAR project and contributes her reflections and observations. She is a white, able-bodied, cis-woman in her 30s from a working-class background. At the time of the project, she was a doctoral student.

All of the young people self-reported to have a high interest in issues of racial and social justice and self-identified as being sociopolitically active in their communities. Sociopolitical action included online actions and content creation, mutual aid work, working within political organizations, grassroots organizing, working on youth boards for elected officials, and political education of their peers. Social issues important to youth included climate change, racial injustice and anti-racism, housing justice, prison and police abolition, anti-capitalism, trans liberation feminism, and more. Their organizing experience varied. All but one youth were involved in at least one social or community organization (online or offline). More than half described themselves as very active, both online and offline. All others had at least some present or past involvement in organizing within the past two years. The facilitator has over ten years of community organizing experience (mutual aid, direct action, labor and tenant organizing, and policy advocacy work) and ten years of experience facilitating YPAR projects with middle and high-school-aged youth.

Training & Preparation. At the beginning of the project, all youth co-researchers attended an orientation and training. We discussed our shared goals for the project, constructed and clarified our guiding research questions, discussed logistics, and completed training on capturing and collecting social media images and videos. We also completed a reflection activity based on the University of Michigan's LSA Inclusive Teaching Initiative's Social Identity Wheel (n.d.) and Spectrum Activity Questions (n.d.). These activities help people reflect on the relationships between their personal and social identities and their positionality as researchers.

We also conducted a workshop on ethics and data privacy. We developed strategies for ensuring that personal and identifying information was protected, including that of potential indirect participants they may observe on social media. After meeting with each youth to learn more about their interests, assets, skills, and capacities, the first author developed the facilitation protocols for the photovoice project.

Data Collection. Ultimately, the collective decided on multiple forms of data collection as part of our photovoice project. Data sources included collecting and analyzing images or screenshots, written reflection, semi-structured interviews, open dialogue, and some observation by the facilitator.

Visual research methods incorporate still or moving images to collect and analyze data and disseminate research findings (Rose, 2014). When paired with narratives, images offer a unique way of describing everyday activities and people's understandings of space, place, and relationships (Wang & Hannes, 2020). Visual research methods are valuable tools for opening up critical dialogue, allow for multiple ways of knowing and sensing to be incorporated (i.e., memory, emotion, sensory), and allow participants to take the role of an expert of their own experience (Roberts, 2011; Happer, 2002; Riddett-Moore & Siegesmund, 2012; Pauwels, 2015).

This study employs a modified version of the Photovoice method, first introduced by Wang & Burris (1997). Caroline Wang (1999) identified a three-pronged approach to understanding and analyzing images: "(1) the production of the images, (2) the reception of the images and meanings attributed to them by audiences, and (3) the content of the images themselves" (p. 186). Photovoice includes a series of procedures: (1) recruitment and selection of community leaders, (2) recruitment of photovoice participants, (3) the introduction of the methodology to participants, (4) obtaining informed consent, (5) posing an initial theme for creating/collecting images, (6) distributing necessary technology & resources, (7) providing time for participants to collect/create images, (8) meet to discuss images and (9) disseminate research (Wang, 1999; 2006).

Images and Screenshots. Photovoice submissions were still images of posts, screenshots, and video or screen recording formats. Over eight weeks, each participant-researcher collected screenshots of social media posts, downloaded videos, or captured screen recordings of their social media activity. To provide some structure and ensure a diversity of data, the facilitator instructed the youth researchers to submit three photovoice submissions per week, which they felt provided insight into our key research questions. Youth researchers de-identified their data to the best of their ability and submitted their photovoice submissions into RedCap, a secure web application for managing online databases.

Written Reflection. Along with each submission, youth researchers also filled out a written reflection guided by the analytical questions posed by Wang (1999) and Wang & Hannes (2020). The writing prompts were inspired by the 'SHOWeD' framework (Wang, 1999, p. 188) for analyzing photovoice posts. The written reflections emphasized the following of this framework: (1) What do you see here? (2) How does this post relate to critical consciousness or organizing? and (3) Why do you think this post is so impactful (positively or negatively)?

Semi-Structured Interviews and Open Dialogue. In total, there were five meetings across six months. These meetings comprised semi-structured interviews and open dialogue about emerging issues or ideas. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and included as data in our analysis. Before the photovoice portion of the study began, the facilitator met with each participant-researcher to discuss their ideas, theories, and experiences with sociopolitical development. We discussed their conceptualizations of critical consciousness, sociopolitical action, and capacity-building for social justice work. We also discussed the online and offline factors that most contribute to or limit their sociopolitical development.

The second meeting utilized a semi-structured interview protocol. It focused on the youth-community-object triangle in the activity system model. Notably, it emphasized (1) learning about the young people's identities, their perspective of self, their social values, and political attitudes; (2) learning about parts of their offline

ecosystem that influence their sociopolitical development; and (3) learning about young people's social media construction of sociopolitical self. The third meeting used a semi-structured interview protocol. It focused on issues of social media and sociopolitical action and factors related to the effect of the current events of Black Lives Matter and the COVID-19 pandemic. The fourth meeting partially utilized a semi-structured protocol to facilitate a first-order analysis of youth photovoice submissions. However, about half the time, there was an unstructured dialogue about emerging issues. The fifth meeting focused on finishing the analysis, identifying recommendations for action based on our results, and reflecting on the process as a whole.

Analysis. Wang developed a series of questions to facilitate critical reflection and dialogue using the acronym SHOWeD: (1) What do you **S**ee here? (2) What is really **H**appening here? (3) How does this relate to **O**ur lives? (4) **W**hy does this situation, concern, or strength exist? (5) What can we **D**o about it? (Wang, 1999, p. 188). This accessible framework has been widely adopted for photovoice analysis. However, Qingchun, Wang & Hannes (2020) offer a complimentary framework where they center their analytical gaze on the sites of production, the photo, and the audience (or dissemination). Analysis at each site is divided into pre-production (planning and preparation for taking pictures) and production (shooting photos in the field). Each production stage has three modalities to consider: technological, compositional, and social.

This paper takes both the SHOWeD and Wang & Hannes analytical framework into account. The guiding analytical questions posed by Caroline Wang (1999) and Wang & Hannes (2020) were modified for the context of analyzing social media artifacts as photos or images. The facilitator and youth researchers met to identify and discuss the issues, themes, and theories that emerged in their data. Some analytical questions were integrated into the photovoice written reflection submitted with each image. Others were incorporated into data analysis meetings between each youth researcher and the facilitator. These meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Codifying issues, themes, and theories. The facilitator synthesized the data from the recordings and transcripts into issues, themes, and theories using in vivo coding. This approach emphasizes the actual spoken words of the participants themselves (Strauss, 1987) and is particularly useful for highlighting the voices of youth in the research process itself (Saldana, 2021). After completing initial coding for all transcripts, surveys, and written reflections, the facilitator organized the in vivo codes into categories based on processes for each youth researcher.

The facilitator brought each youth researcher a basic map of the in vivo codes. At this point, the facilitator and participant-researcher conducted second-order coding together. We discussed which codes spoke to similar ideas and which seemed to be in conflict or contradiction. Then, the facilitator organized the key codes across all youth researchers and presented this map of code categories. Each discussion took about 1 to 1.5 hours and was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Process Analysis Methods

Interviews. During our final meeting (which took place in October of 2021), the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with each youth researcher about how the YPAR process affected their use of social media, their theories and beliefs about organizing, and their social justice work. All interviews took place via Zoom.

Observation. Facilitator observations were collected by the first author throughout the project and again after the project had finished. Observations were unstructured and responsive to issues and themes that the youth researcher raised. Observations were recorded for each young person, and the cumulative notes were reviewed for this paper.

Analysis. Process coding is an analytic method that helps us better understand processes embedded into conceptual concepts and assists in identifying the consequences of action or interaction (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2021). The first author coded each interview according to this approach, using gerunds to connote action in the data. This included simple observable activity and more general conceptual action (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The process codes were then summarized and compared using code charting (Harding, 2019) to identify patterns and develop propositions. All coding was done using NVivo software.

Triangulation. The analysis results were triangulated using other research products from the YPAR study, and the first author completed a thorough member-checking process with each youth organizer individually in November of 2021. Any discrepancies between my interpretations and the participants' intent were discussed and resolved.

Results

As part of the YPAR project, the youth researchers co-constructed a conceptual framework for youth SPD (Malorni et al., 2023). While they identified four domains of youth SPD— thinking, doing, feeling, and relating— these constructs were conceptualized as profoundly interconnected and interdependent. As such, it is important to note that some reflections on how the YPAR project affected their SPD span multiple domains. In accordance with their conceptual framework, the youth organizers were able to identify links between SPD and aspects of all four domains, but there was particular emphasis on the 'thinking' domain.

Thinking

The YPAR collective conceptualized the 'thinking' domain of youth SPD as increasing social awareness, fostering critical self-awareness, and developing skills for critical analysis. Table 1 (Appendix A) is an excerpt of the SPD constructs and operational themes that guided our reflections on how the YPAR process affected SPD. While the collective noted ways that the YPAR process supported all three constructs, there was the most emphasis on critical self-awareness and critical analysis.

By collecting and tracking their data, all researchers stated that they became more proactive in seeking out various sources, standpoints, and marginalized perspectives. The facilitator was also able to observe this change in the data collected and analyzed. For example, Riley talked about how they looked at all the images they collected, and independently reflected on how many came from individuals, organizations, and content creators. They reported that they also paid more attention to who they thought the intended audience was, which helped them

think critically about the interests and priorities of those who created and disseminated the content. They found themselves adjusting their data collection decisions to be more "*balanced*" in their eyes.

This practice was supported by the questions posed to youth researchers during data collection. Eventually, it became an instinct for most youth researchers, highlighting the growth in their capacity to develop critical and nuanced understandings of the world around them. Reese explained, "*I think before the project, I would just interact with posts and not really think about them. But now I'm thinking more critically about the posts that I'm receiving and the message that they're kind of looking for me to get.*" They explained that their social awareness increased because they continued to seek out information about social justice, but also "*look at the accounts that I am engaging with more*" because through the research process they noticed that "*A lot of the content that I interact with is a very similar and like it's creating a narrative, not like in like a propaganda way, but just like there's like an intention behind the post and I think before I take it at face value. I started looking into the accounts that I'm engaging more with. I think that's the main thing that's changed [due to YPAR project].*" Jaidah agreed, sharing, "*I definitely look at those posts more, and I pay more attention to what they're saying and the comments just because it became a habit and looking for them.*"

The youth researchers conceptualized critical self-awareness as learning how to apply considerations of power, justice, and oppression into broader areas of their life, exploring one's opinions and ideologies, learning how to work through one's contradictory ideas or values, developing their political identity and reflecting on their motivations for action, and being transparent about oneself with others (Malorni et al., 2023). When Julia started the YPAR project, she described herself as very quiet, expressed a lack of confidence in her knowledge, and shared that she was unlikely to speak up about social justice issues with peers or at school. However, throughout the project, it was clear that Julia felt an increased sense of confidence in her knowledge and her ability to contribute to the learning of others by connecting her experiential knowledge with various aspects of life and society. She shared, "*I feel like ever since this project I have been more* [trails off], *I've known more about certain issues that we talk about in school.*" She talks about how she sees herself "*connecting certain aspects of my life*" with what she is learning in the YPAR project. Malik had a similar experience applying what he was learning in the YPAR project to other areas of life. He shared that "*Like in school [if] one of the teachers bring up a social justice topic, I was actually [feeling] comfortable talking about it more than I was before this project. It made me open my eyes to all these different topics happening in the world right now.*" He explained that part of this increased comfort came from feeling connected to social justice issues rather than thinking about it abstractly. However, the inquiry process elicited more doubt and confusion in some of the more experienced youth organizers. Both Peter and Reese communicated that the YPAR project made them less confident that their online organizing was supportive of their SPD. They both stated that they came into the project feeling self-assured in their identities as strong organizers, and finished the project with an increased awareness of the ambivalence of social media organizing and questions about how they wanted to proceed. While this inner conflict was cognitively and emotionally hard on them, the facilitator observed this as evidence of deepening their critical analysis and critical self-awareness skills.

All but two researchers shared that through the YPAR project, particularly in data collection and analysis, they could more clearly see how their ideologies were reflected in their online lives. For example, the data collection

process prompted Jaidah to reflect on how often they passively consumed information rather than sought it out. This is relevant to issues of social awareness. However, Jaidah shared that they could see how it made them focus on a limited and consistently changing set of social issues more than others. Reese talked about how the data collection and analysis process increased this aspect of self-awareness for them, too, "*It made me realize how much I was getting information from social media, and made me think that isn't necessarily the best in terms of looking at my own opinions and how much that has formed my opinions.... And I didn't really realize that before.*"

The youth researchers believed critical analysis was developed by being open and responsive to new information, navigating feelings of inadequacy, burnout, and confusion, and assessing the reliability and trustworthiness of information and its sources (Malorni et al., 2023). Sofia came into the project with a very favorable position on the role of social media in youth social justice learning and organizing. However, she said that through data collection and analysis processes, she was prompted to "*explain my thinking*" around what she was collecting and why. She said she was surprised that "*for some, it was positive, but it also had negative aspects*" and that it was transformative for her to have to explicate what "*was that something behind that negativity.*" She saw this play out most in the prompts by the facilitator and prompts on the survey she filled out with each image/post submission. Reese agreed and said that the YPAR process "*made me slow down a little bit and think about it*" in reference to how they were learning about social justice issues. They also talked about how the pacing of the project contributed to developing critical analysis as a habit outside of just the YPAR project. Being more intentional about reflecting on how they were using social media for organizing (a focus of the research) over six months "*allowed me to piece together a lot of studies that I was engaging with that I wouldn't traditionally think they were connected.*"

Structure throughout the YPAR process facilitated five of the youth researchers in digesting complex ideas and helped them develop a deeper understanding of power dynamics in their organizing (which is also important for the 'relating' domain discussed below). For example, one researcher, Jaidah, noted that the data collection process acted as a scaffold to help them reflect on what they observed in their environment, both on and under the surface, in a "*simple and easy to understand.*" As part of the photovoice process, each youth researcher completed the written reflection that had a mix of targeted questions (e.g., Who do you think is the intended audience of this post?) and also open-ended reflection prompts adapted from the SHOWeD framework (Wang, 1999). The information from these surveys was later revisited as participants analyzed their data collection. Jaidah and Peter noted that offering multi-format and multi-modal ways of processing information was impactful. Peter explained that the image data collection, combined with later reflection and dialogue, gave him the time he needed to "*think and spiral and think of more thoughts*" but then come back together and "*get into your flow*" in dialogue with the facilitator or other researchers.

Peter said that the YPAR project helped him step out of his day-to-day ways of operating and look at his social media use "*on a more macro scale.*" He explained, "*Talking and thinking about social media activism has made me realize it's very complicated, and you could be doing the wrong thing, or you could not be.*" He shared that he felt he had a better understanding of some possible "*unintended consequences*" but still felt "*more hesitant about using social media for activism now.*" Peter did not seem defeated or frustrated by this ambivalence; instead, he was curious and thoughtful. He reflected on situations when social media may be more or less effective as

a tool for social change. The foundation of the YPAR project welcomed ambivalence. This was represented in the YPAR collective's initial meetings, where we explored both positive and negative aspects of social media for social justice, and was also reflected in our central research question (i.e., In what ways does social media facilitate and limit youth sociopolitical development?), which guided the youth researchers' data collection, analysis, and writing.

Nearly all youth researchers felt that this project increased their capacity for critical assessment of information trustworthiness and credibility. Sofia said that studying the social media posts of her peers made her more critically conscious of what she was sharing or reposting too. She said that she is now "*really taking the time to fact check everything and making sure that everything is what I agree with as well. That is something I reflected a lot while I was collecting all the pieces.*" Reese had a similar experience and said that they saw this practice develop, "*most likely the analysis section where we talked about why you decided to submit that post and where you asked who the intended audience is for this. I think those were the biggest because I really wasn't giving attention to it, and it made me think, 'oh, what is the actual intention of this?' whether or not I was engaging with it. Like is it a trustworthy source in the first place, or is this the full side of the story?*" Jaidah added that this aspect of critical analysis was not limited to ideas, but they also found herself applying it to calls to action as well. They gave an example, "*you hear about how people are fleeing or fled from Afghanistan, but you don't hear about how people literally waited like over a week like standing in a freezing cold river without any food or clean water. All that you hear is donate to this charity to help people fleeing from Afghanistan. You don't hear a lot about what's actually going on and you sort of feel like you just got to take this action without necessarily thinking about it. You don't actually do any research to see if the charity is reputable.*" They went on to explain that they found themselves being more conscious about the action they take, and where the call for that action comes from after the YPAR project. Riley agreed that the YPAR project helped them develop a sharper eye for critically assessing information and that this practice extended beyond the YPAR project. They shared, "*It's interesting because I've gotten into the habit of analyzing social media posts more and being like, 'How is this affecting socio-political development?' and stuff. Which is interesting and I think I'm finding similar stuff to what we found this whole project. I think I have learned to step back a bit and be like 'hmm it's not just social media, there's a lot of thinking behind it'. I wonder who made that. I wonder if they were trying to reach a specific audience. Interesting! It's less this all nebulous force!*"

Doing

The YPAR collective conceptualized youth SPD's 'doing' domain as developing skills for mobilization and organization, practicing accountability, and self-love and/or care. Table 2 (Appendix B) is an excerpt of the SPD constructs and operational themes that guided our reflections on how the YPAR process affected SPD. The collective noted ways that the YPAR process supported all three constructs to some extent, with the most emphasis on building skills for mobilization and organization.

At the end of the project, six of the youth researchers were using the study results to develop and launch a "for youth, by youth" organizer training focused on mindfully using social media for organizing. The process

of translating their research into a training for other youth organizers helped them develop time management, facilitation, and event coordination skills. The facilitator observed that all youth needed to practice their time management skills as they kept track of their data collection, completed written reflections, and generally had to manage their responsibilities within the YPAR project. The facilitator offered all youth weekly reminders and check-ins to help them clarify that week's project priorities and talk through anything that may feel unclear or confusing. There was more support needed in the first few weeks of the project, but by the fourth month, all but one youth researcher were able to effectively self-manage their data collection and written analysis. The participant who struggled the most with time management was the youngest and one of the least experienced organizers, suggesting that different scaffolding and support may have been needed.

The YPAR collective saw accountability as an important practice for youth SPD. This included holding themselves accountable and learning how to effectively hold others accountable. With respect to self-accountability, multiple examples of youth critically self-examining their ideas and biases have been discussed in the previous sections. With respect to holding others accountable, Riley shared that this project helped them clarify a feeling that *"something wasn't right"* and constructively hold her intergenerational climate organization accountable to racial justice. Throughout the course of analysis, they concluded that there was a lack of meaningful consideration for intersectional issues (an important aspect of youth SPD in the 'relating' domain) in their youth-led climate change organization. They reported that by being able to flesh out some of their ideas around intersectionality and organizing in dialogue with the facilitator and their co-researchers, they felt more prepared to raise some issues and concerns at a retreat their organization had.

In addition to the behavioral aspects of SPD conceptualized by the YPAR collective, Nalani, Jaidah, and Riley all talked about how their participation in the YPAR project helped them better see everyday interactions or situations as opportunities for organizing. Nalani talked about how, by researching his own experience and environments, he is better able to see *"what different things were and how they can be used for getting people help or just trying to make things in the world more equitable."* Jaidah agreed and said that the project illuminated various resources in their life and community where *"I didn't really think about how helpful it could be before, but now I see that it's pretty obvious."* Riley shared that the YPAR project helped them think more critically about how to mobilize others and effectively call others to action, *"I think that in my social justice work, I'm thinking more about what motivates people to come to social justice work, like tap into effectively the core of what get people organized."*

Relating

The YPAR collective conceptualized the 'relating' domain of youth SPD as developing skills for communication and dialogue, setting and respecting boundaries, learning how to address power dynamics, and building strong relationships within and between communities (Malorni et al., 2023). Table 3 (Appendix C) is an excerpt of the SPD constructs and operational themes that guided our reflections. The collective noted ways that the YPAR process supported all four constructs to some degree.

The youth researchers identified various communication skills as being vital to youth SPD. This included the ability to communicate effectively with and within diverse communities and learning how to navigate conflict and disagreement. As discussed in both the 'thinking' and 'doing' domains, most of the youth researchers developed a practice of thinking critically about intended audiences and the implicit interests that might be embedded into communication. The young researchers perceived this to increase their capacity for critically digesting information; in addition, some of those skills may have helped them be more effective communicators in their own organizing work with their communities and in their relationships with other organizers. In discussing and assessing each other's data collection, the youth researchers were respectful and curious about each other's perspectives. They built off one another's ideas and solicited differing perspectives. Reese talks about how the YPAR process helped them navigate conflict and disagreement with empathy in the 'feeling' section below. Another example was with Nalani. He felt that having a space of dialogue and dissent helped him form his own opinions and try out different approaches to navigating disagreement. He shared that while collecting data, he would come across ideas that he wanted to challenge and intentionally tried out different ways of responding to data collection. The diverse ways of interacting were still true to his ideas, interests, and priorities, but it allowed him to try out and critically assess ways of navigating conflict and tension. Some of his responses to disagreements included setting boundaries and "*knowing when to just stop responding*." The YPAR collective saw setting boundaries, particularly in relationships and dialogue with others around issues of power and justice, as being very important for positive youth SPD, and the YPAR project gave Nalani a place to explore what his boundaries from a space of inquiry and curiosity.

As part of setting boundaries and addressing power dynamics, all of the youth organizers agreed that it was important for people to learn how to navigate the amorphous boundaries between the personal and political, learn how to apply an intersectional lens to life, and learn how to center peoples' experiences and power dynamics without centering the individuals themselves (i.e., not becoming too individualistic in their social change work). May and Malik both said that having one-on-one dialogues with the adult facilitator throughout the project helped them develop these practices. For example, May reported that conversations with the facilitator helped her "*learn more about the way I think and organize.*" She said that the facilitator would ask prompts that were relevant and thought-provoking and helped her think through some of the ways that she was addressing power dynamics in her organization.

Finally, all of the youth researchers agreed that building strong sociopolitical relationships is an important aspect of SPD. May shared that this project actually helped her make connections with other youth organizers in the area, and see how their work was aligned. This included building stronger relationships with the other youth researchers, but also with youth organizations that she came across in her research and planning for the "for youth, by youth" organizer training.

Feeling

The YPAR collective conceptualized the 'feeling' domain of youth SPD as developing a sustained commitment to social justice, practicing empathy, and fostering humility. Table 4 (Appendix D) is an excerpt of the SPD

constructs and operational themes that guided our reflections. The collective noted ways that the YPAR process supported all three constructs to some degree.

The youth researchers believed that to develop a sustained commitment to social justice, it was important to understand their sociopolitical activities as part of a bigger picture and to be able to overcome their discomfort with conflict and tension—as both are important parts of social change. May shared that participating in the YPAR project validated the research project and social justice organizing work she was doing in her communities. She shared that the YPAR project, particularly engaging with her peers, also helped her see her work as part of a larger effort. She said,

> *It reaffirms that social media activism is activism, and does create impact and, other people use it in some little ways that I do. The YPAR project reaffirms that using social media for things like mutual aid or raising awareness on certain in-person movements or actions does go a long way. I guess this encouraged me just the way that other youth in Seattle use social media to boost their movements and further their goals just reminds me and kind of validates me that the work I'm doing is important, whether it's offline or in person.*

Building empathy by learning how to take others' perspectives and acknowledge multiple personal truths was another important aspect of the 'feeling' domain. Reese talked about how the YPAR project helped them learn how to practice empathy when engaging in disagreement or navigating tension with others around social justice issues or ideas. They shared that,

> *I'm a lot more cognizant of the way that people talk about social issues, and it's amplified by the fact that, like in my government class, we talked about like current issues or whatever, and so a lot of the times the things that people are talking about is like 'Oh, I saw X, Y Z thing' and a lot of the times it's obviously skewed depending upon like their point of view. So it's shown me how like people have taken what they're ingesting on social media and kind used it in their everyday life, and have used that formed their identity and so from there, I think that's kind of changed the way that I engaged with people. Instead of it being like, 'Oh, this is how I think,' it's like, 'This is how I perceived it based on where I'm at.'*

They talked about how this helped them build empathy and understanding for others and be less reactive to ideas that they disagree. This practice can be particularly useful for acting as a compassionate educator, helping others unlearn oppressive ways of thinking and behaving.

Finally, there were multiple examples of the YPAR project helping youth see themselves as a continuous learner. Some of those are discussed in the previous sections. Malik, who was newly politicized when the YPAR project began, added that this project increased his interest, capacity, and commitment to seek out information about social justice. He shared, *"Because this project asked me to look for specific pieces on social-political impacts and current events, I had to be more active using social media rather than it being a casual thing."* He shared that

his interest and capacity for pursuing knowledge about social justice has increased even after the project was over, "*I'm more active in trying to find news pieces of news events happening, and also actively try and find look at stories, which could tell me important stuff or could showcase events and tell me events of social justice.*" By the end of the YPAR project, Malik felt like this project "*asked us to be more active rather than passive*" and that this "*attracted his attention*" to continue to learn more "*about social justice and any upstanding action.*"

Discussion

In looking across the four domains of youth SPD, the youth researchers emphasized various aspects of the YPAR process as being important for youth SPD. The youth researchers noted that having multi-modal and multi-format ways of reflecting was beneficial for social awareness, critical self-awareness, and critical analysis. This included the opportunity to have quiet personal reflection, opportunities for group processing, written reflection, and expression through art (e.g., images). Having these opportunities deepened some of the youth researchers' understanding of social issues, which in turn deepened their interest and desire to engage in critical dialogue. The youth researchers also noted that having a mix of clear structure and open-ended flexibility was important. For example, one researcher noted that the data collection and analysis procedures, which included written reflection, open dialogue, and semi-structured prompts, all acted as a scaffold for them to build skills for analyzing the social world around them.

Being in the researcher position, the youth were more proactive about seeking out various sources, viewpoints, and marginalized perspectives, and the data collection process helped them critically assess their social environment and think more critically about power dynamics embedded into information and communication. Multiple youth researchers also noted that analyzing their data helped them reflect on their ideologies and how they were influenced by the messages around them.

The youth researchers also highlighted the importance of the adult facilitator not removing themselves from the YPAR collective. Multiple participants talked about how the prompts and open dialogue between the facilitator and themselves were critical for developing critical analysis, developing more intersectional lenses, learning how to navigate the amorphous boundaries between the personal and political, and being mindful of how they are navigating power dynamics in dialogue or organizing relationships. Multiple participants talked about how thinking critically about messaging, a key aspect of the Wang (1999) and Wang and Hannes (2020) frameworks helped them learn how to set boundaries and learn when to engage, and when to pull back in sociopolitical disagreement.

The project's foundation (our methods and ethics training, research question, etc.) all welcomed a spirit of ambivalence and exploration of nuance. We also strayed from binary ways of thinking in our data collection and analysis. This practice showed up in the youth researchers' ability to take in contradictions, be responsive to new information, and navigate feelings of confusion or the pressure to look for the "right" perspective. Multiple youth talked about how this expanded their consciousness of how different issues and struggles were interconnected and helped them become more critical information consumers. Some also reported that it improved their

ability to be in constructive dialogue with people who disagree and practice more empathy and humility without abandoning their values.

The YPAR project also increased the confidence of some of the youngest and least experienced youth organizers. It helped them make connections between their lived experiences and feel more comfortable speaking up in places outside of the YPAR project. Youth also developed their skills and capacity for mobilization and organization through the project. This began as they had to make decisions about the project methods and timelines, but this was most evident when they worked to translate their research findings into an organizer training for other youth. They could apply the lessons learned about effective communication with diverse audiences, project management, and facilitation. Through planning their action, they were also able to strengthen their relationships with one another and with local organizations or coalitions. Having peer engagement and connection opportunities in the YPAR project helped some participants better understand their social justice work as part of a bigger picture. They were better able to see how their strengths and skills could be used to address specific needs and see how their efforts are part of a broader network of action. This perspective also supports the young researchers' feelings of efficacy. The adult facilitator did offer help and support in practicing these habits by offering more reminders and having more 1-1 check-ins in the first half of the project, but this support was less needed later. Multiple youth researchers also highlighted how the YPAR project helped them see more opportunities for organizing or other social justice actions in their daily lives.

Finally, while not the focus on the onset of this process analysis, this study was nested in a larger YPAR study on social media and youth SPD. Social media is ubiquitous to youth social, emotional, and political development. It is also deeply integrated into youth organizing and other forms of activism or political participation (Anderson et al., 2018; Bañales et al., 2020; Diemer et al., 2016). Paired with adult facilitator guidance, youth may be able to use photovoice to increase their critical digital literacy. This project also highlighted the need for social and emotional support for youth as they go through the inquiry process. This study indicates that some youth experience sociopolitical confusion and frustration as they engage in inquiry and uncover more 'known unknowns.' This may have an effect on their sense of agency or efficacy. The YPAR process also acted as an incubator for youth to try out different ways of engaging in political dialogue online and then have a structured space to debrief and reflect on how their interactions went. Given the prevalence of online risks for youth, social media conflict and political polarization in today's digital environment, this practice may hold promise for more effective online activism.

Limitations

There are several significant limitations when applying the lessons learned in this paper. First, the connections between the YPAR process and SPD discussed in this paper are derived from self-reported data and observation. There was no measure for young people's baseline SPD before and after the YPAR process. Future studies might use the insights here to develop and test a longitudinal measure of changes in SPD throughout and after YPAR participation. Furthermore, there may have been other sociopolitical factors that influenced youth SPD during

the six months of the YPAR project. However, only data where youth explicitly made connections between specific aspects of the YPAR process, and their perceptions of their own SPD were used in this paper.

Next, the YPAR project and the semi-structured interview that sources the youth researchers' reflections all took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our ability to collaborate and dialogue in person was restricted to online video conferencing and written reflections. While this impacted all aspects of the project experience, I suspect that this most greatly affected issues pertaining to SPD's 'relating' and 'doing' domains.

Due to ethical concerns of confidentiality and the introduction of indirect participants with social media images/screenshots, all data shared between youth was filtered first through the facilitator. Identifying information (of researchers and indirect participants) was removed, and this sometimes altered the images that youth submitted. While this did not impact the overall experience or interpretation of data significantly, it is essential to note. It is also important to acknowledge that the facilitation decisions made by the YPAR facilitator influenced which YPAR-SPD links may be most salient to the youth researchers. Furthermore, youth's racial, gender, and other social identities influence their experience of SPD and the YPAR inquiry process. However, since the youth co-researchers in this study are listed as co-authors in different publications and this is a small group, there is a concern regarding confidentiality. Therefore, Quotes, ideas, and other contributions cannot be directly linked to youth; thus, this analysis did not include exploring variations within and between social identities.

It is notable that all youth organizers were progressive or left-leaning in their ideologies. This is generally aligned with the existing research on SPD, which explicitly focuses on liberatory SPD practice only. However, it must be noted that this study does not represent more neutral, central, or conservative ideologies. Maintaining a commitment to anti-oppression is central to both YPAR and SPD values. However, learning if and how the YPAR inquiry process affects young people with more apathetic, centrist, or conservative ideologies may provide insight into effective social justice education for that youth population.

Additionally, there was limited divergence in themes connecting youth SPD and YPAR amongst this group. The youth were diverse in age, race, ability, gender, and organizing experience. This may indicate that this process analysis focused on shared and collective experience over individual experience, or that perhaps a larger group size is needed to illuminate some of the diversity of SPD and YPAR experience.

Finally, the author of this paper was the YPAR facilitator and the sole coder for the process analysis of their semi-structured interviews. Her positionality limits her perspective as a facilitator, adult, white cis-woman, and academic. She was an 'outsider' in relation to the youth researchers in almost every regard. However, she conducted a member-checking process with each youth researcher to ensure their perspectives were interpreted appropriately.

Implications for Research & Practice

Though the YPAR project was completed with a relatively small group of youth, these insights have significant research and practice implications for the fields of YPAR and youth SPD. The facilitation and practice of YPAR is often a 'black box,' with a lack of transparency in how YPAR is implemented (Anyon et al., 2018; Malorni et al., 2022). Their insights illuminate some of the inner workings of YPAR practice in a way that can spark

more mindful methodological development. Additionally, we can use the YPAR-SPD links identified here to develop and test conceptual and practical models. This may include dialogue processes, SPD program/intervention structure and format considerations, and SPD program/intervention content.

The insights provided in this study can be immediately useful to YPAR facilitators and practitioners who aim to support youth SPD. This project demonstrated that the participatory photovoice methodology is well-suited for inquiry on and about social media. In particular, the methods laid out by Wang (1999) and Wang and Hannes (2020) help youth engage critically with the production, content, dissemination, and reception of social media. This increased the rigor of the participatory inquiry process.

Future research may include a larger group size to document a broader diversity of experience within a YPAR project. This may also be done using comparative case studies. To better understand how YPAR contributes to and reinforces youth SPD in the long term, a mixed methods study may be able to test some of the links illuminated in this study. For example, a pre-, mid- and post-test can be administered to better measure how critical self-awareness changes for youth at varying levels of critical consciousness and organizing experience. Future studies may also be able to better account for the diverse contributions of adult YPAR facilitators on youth SPD.

Conclusion

YPAR and youth SPD are increasingly cited as mutually reinforcing scholarship and practice fields. However, outside of being aligned in values and aims, it has not been clear how the two processes interact with one another. This study aimed to help identify what some of these links may be through interviews with ten adolescent researchers who completed a YPAR study on social media and youth SPD. The YPAR team critically reflected on their experience in a photovoice project to link specific YPAR practices that reinforced youth SPD. In doing so, they illuminated some of the key practices, processes, and mechanisms linking YPAR participation and SPD. These insights may help YPAR facilitators strengthen the rigor and relevance of the inquiry process and support the SPD of youth researchers.

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Appendices

Appendix A: SPD Domain – Thinking

Table 1.
Summary of youth conceptualizations of SPD (Malorni et al., 2023)

SPD Domain	Constructs	Operational Themes
Thinking	Social Awareness	Developing an understanding of how injustices work
		Proactive and continuous learning
		Seeking out multiple marginalized perspectives
		Digesting various sources and standpoints
	Critical Self-Awareness	Apply considerations of power, justice, and oppression on life
		Exploring ones' opinions and ideologies
		Working through ones' own contradictory ideas or values
		Developing political identity and reflecting on motivations for action
		Being transparent with oneself and others
	Critical Analysis	Being open and responsive to new information
		Navigating feelings of inadequacy, burnout, and confusion
		Assessing the reliability and trustworthiness of information

Appendix B: SPD Domain – Doing

Table 2.
Summary of youth conceptualizations of SPD (Malorni et al., 2023)

SPD Domain	Constructs	Operational Themes
Doing	Mobilization and Organization	Facilitation, Coordinating event logistics, Managing personal and group time
		Building confidence for engaging with others
		Effective communication with diverse audiences
	Accountability	Self-accountability
		Holding others accountable
	Self-Love and Care	Loving ones' identities
		Self-care
		Daily self-advocacy

Appendix C: SPD Domain – Relating

Table 3.
Summary of youth conceptualizations of SPD (Malorni et al., 2023)

SPD Domain	Constructs	Operational Themes
Relating	Communicating and dialogue	Communicating with/within diverse communities
		Navigating conflict and disagreement
		Facilitating dialogue for others
	Setting and respecting boundaries	Knowing when to engage and when to disengage
		Assessing capacity in shared workspaces
		Navigating the amorphous boundaries between "personal" and "political"
	Addressing power dynamics	Applying intersectional approaches to learning and action
		Centering social experiences and power dynamics without centering individuals
	Building strong relationships	Building strong relationships within communities
		Building strong relationships between communities and coalitions
		Transparency

Appendix D: SPD Domain – Feeling

Table 4.
Summary of youth conceptualizations of SPD (Malorni et al., 2023)

SPD Domain	Constructs	Operational Themes
Feeling	Developing a sustained commitment to social justice	Understanding sociopolitical activities as part of bigger picture
		Overcoming discomfort with conflict and tension
	Empathy	Perspective-taking
		Acknowledging multiple positionalities and personal truths
	Humility	Emotional regulation when being challenged or taking in new information
		Seeing oneself as a continuous learner