

CATALYZING RESISTANCE:
A SYSTEMATIC THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS
DEVELOPMENT IN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENT SPACES

by

CHRISTOPHER A. STRICKLAND

(Under the Direction of June G. Hopps)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how critical consciousness emerges and is sustained within anti-oppressive social movement organizations, specifically exploring the Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America Northwest Georgia Branch. Using systematic thematic analysis through interviews with ten members, the study identifies conditions that foster critical consciousness development: catalytic experiences that create cognitive dissonance, supportive environments for processing contradictions, opportunities to challenge internalized capitalist beliefs, relational organizing practices, and identity integration in systemic critique. The research reveals how participants translate critical analysis into transformative action through local engagement and coalition-building, while identifying barriers including geographic inaccessibility and organizational contradictions. The findings suggest that effective consciousness-raising requires alignment between organizational practices and stated values, relational pedagogy centered on members' experiences, and multiple pathways for engagement that honor diverse motivations and identity-based perspectives.

INDEX WORDS: critical consciousness, social movements, anti-racism, anti-oppression

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Statement of the Problem

The contemporary global landscape, shaped by an advanced capitalistic framework supported and accelerated by mass exploitation, control, and marginalization, has evolved to a point at which it has hijacked and objectified our very subjectivity. Sounding the alarm of the impact of contemporary white supremacist capitalist patriarchy on human consciousness, bell hooks (1999) charged,

“Understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people. If we only view the margin as sign, marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then a certain hopelessness and despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one’s creativity, one’s imagination is at risk, there that one’s mind is fully colonized, there that the freedom one longs for is lost” (p. 150-151).

A world shaped by the promise, logic, and hegemonic power of capitalism now faces an unsettling reckoning. This moment has been made possible by centuries of forced resource extraction and labor exploitation, disproportionately targeting historically marginalized communities. As critical theorists warned since the dawn of industrialization, we are now approaching a breaking point, where the global rise in protests over unaffordable necessities and

systemic dehumanization reflects a deeper, long-ignored crisis (Fraser, 2020; Harvey, 2005; Robinson, 1983).

Contemporary global capitalism has created unprecedented levels of wealth inequality, fundamentally reshaping social relations and power dynamics. According to the World Inequality Report (Chancel et al., 2022), the richest 10% capture 52% of global income while the bottom 50% earn just 8.5%. This disparity has accelerated dramatically since the 1980s, with the wealth share of the top 1% in the United States increasing from 22.3% in 1978 to 38.5% in 2019 (Saez & Zucman, 2020). The Federal Reserve's Survey of Consumer Finances reveals that the wealth gap between the typical white and Black family stands at a ratio of 8:1 (Bhutta et al., 2020), while Oxfam (2022) reports that during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world's ten richest men more than doubled their collective wealth as poverty increased globally. These statistics reveal not merely economic differences but fundamental power asymmetries that shape access to resources, opportunities, and political influence.

These economic disparities manifest through concrete mechanisms of labor exploitation that have evolved to maximize profit extraction while minimizing worker compensation. The Economic Policy Institute (Mishel & Bivens, 2021) documents that worker productivity increased by 61.8% from 1979-2020, yet hourly compensation grew only 17.5% during the same period—a productivity-pay gap that translates to billions in diverted worker earnings. This exploitation extends globally, with the International Labour Organization (2024) reporting that 160 million children remain in child labor and 25 million people work in conditions of forced labor. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) data shows that while real GDP more than doubled since 1980, real median weekly earnings for full-time workers increased by just 7.5% between

1979 and 2019 when adjusted for inflation, demonstrating how economic growth has been systematically diverted away from those who produce it.

Beyond these broad economic indicators, racial capitalism manifests through persistent disparities that reproduce historical patterns of racialized exploitation. Federal Reserve data shows that the typical white family has eight times the wealth of the typical Black family (\$188,200 versus \$24,100) and five times that of the typical Hispanic family (\$36,100) (Bhutta et al., 2020). The Bureau of Justice Statistics reveals that Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at nearly five times the rate of whites (Carson, 2020), creating what scholars term a "prison industrial complex" that generates significant revenue through prison labor often compensated at rates far below minimum wage (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). These racial disparities extend to housing, where a 2018 study by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition documents ongoing redlining practices that have deprived communities of color of significant home equity (Mitchell & Franco, 2018). Concurrently, FBI Uniform Crime Report data shows hate crimes have risen by 42% between 2014 and 2021, with race-based incidents remaining the most common motivation (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism (2021) documented that anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 339% in 2021 compared to 2020 across major U.S. cities, while anti-Black hate crimes remained the most numerous overall. The Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics (2022) further estimates that nearly two-thirds of hate crimes go unreported to police, suggesting official statistics significantly understate the prevalence of such violence.

These violent manifestations coincide with widespread experiences of everyday discrimination: Cox (2024) found that 82% of Black adults say they have experienced discrimination or unfair treatment because of their race, while 68% of Hispanic adults and 76%

of Asian adults report similar experiences. In employment contexts, a meta-analysis of field experiments on hiring discrimination published in *Administrative Science Quarterly* found that callback rates for Black applicants were 36% lower than for equally qualified white applicants, with no significant improvement over time (Quillian et al., 2017). Recent experimental studies by the National Bureau of Economic Research demonstrate persistent discrimination in housing (Christensen & Timmins, 2022), lending (Bartlett et al., 2022), and healthcare (Alsan et al., 2019), showing how racial hierarchy is reproduced across multiple domains of social life. Such statistics demonstrate how capitalism continues to operate through and reproduce racial hierarchies.

The environmental consequences of profit-driven resource extraction further illustrate capitalism's structural effects beyond economic indicators. A peer-reviewed study in the journal *Climatic Change* found that just 100 companies have been responsible for 71% of global industrial greenhouse gas emissions since 1988 (Griffin et al., 2017), while research published in *The Lancet Planetary Health* documents that the Global North, with 16% of the world's population, has produced 92% of excess historical carbon emissions (Hickel, 2020). These environmental costs are not distributed equally—peer-reviewed research in the *American Journal of Public Health* shows that Black Americans are exposed to 1.54 times more fine particulate matter than the population average, while Hispanic Americans face 1.2 times higher exposure (Mikati et al., 2018). The World Bank estimates that climate change could force 132 million people into poverty by 2030 (Jafino et al., 2020), disproportionately affecting those who contributed least to the crisis.

Advanced capitalism has measurably eroded community cohesion and civic engagement, creating a profound disconnection that further entrenches existing power structures. Long-term

data from Pew Research Center (2024a) documents that Americans' trust in government has declined from 73% in 1958 to 22% in 2024, while the General Social Survey shows that interpersonal trust has fallen from 46% in 1972 to 31% in 2018 (Cooper, 2025). This social atomization is reflected in empirical studies on civic participation: research by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) found that volunteer rates fell from 28.8% in 2003 to 24.9% in 2015, with a further drop to 23.2% by 2019. Sociologist Robert Putnam's research, updated in his work with Garrett (2020), confirms these trends, documenting declines in participation across religious groups, labor unions, parent-teacher associations, and civic organizations since the mid-1960s. These changes correlate directly with economic restructuring, Skocpol et al. (2004) empirically demonstrate, the rise of market fundamentalism has transformed community organizations from member-driven associations to professional advocacy groups, diminishing opportunities for cross-class democratic participation and leadership development.

This community disconnection is compounded by the commodification of attention and public space. Auxier (2020) finds that 64% of Americans believe social media has a "mostly negative effect on the way things are going in the country today," with concerns about misinformation and political polarization predominating. The American Time Use Survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) shows that while Americans spend an average of 5.4 hours daily on leisure, over 3.1 hours of this is devoted to television and just 39 minutes to socializing and communicating, with even less time (17 minutes) spent on civic and religious activities. Massachusetts Institute of Technology sociologist Sherry Turkle's (2017) empirical research demonstrates how digital technologies have reshaped patterns of social interaction, with many people reporting fewer deep conversations and diminished capacity for empathy. These patterns reflect what sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2013) identifies as capitalism's

"acceleration" of social life, empirically documented through time-budget studies showing the intensification of work alongside the fragmentation of leisure time. The result is what political scientist Benjamin Barber (2007) terms "privatized citizenship," or a statistically observable retreat from civic life into individualized consumption.

The subjective experience of life under advanced capitalism is increasingly characterized by psychological distress that can be quantified through mental health statistics. The American Psychological Association's Stress in America survey (APA, 2022) reports that money (65%) and the economy (67%) are leading sources of stress for Americans, while the World Health Organization (2022) documents that depression and anxiety disorders cost the global economy approximately \$1 trillion annually in lost productivity. Gallup's Global Emotions Report (2022) records increasing negative emotions worldwide, with worry, stress, and sadness reaching record highs in 2021. A meta-analysis of 151 studies in *Psychological Bulletin* found that materialistic values—central to consumer capitalism—correlate significantly with lower wellbeing and higher psychological distress (Dittmar et al., 2014). Research published in *Social Science & Medicine* demonstrates that income inequality is associated with higher rates of mental illness across 12 developed nations, with an $r = 0.73$ correlation (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010). These statistics suggest that capitalism's effects extend beyond material conditions to shape psychological experience and subjective wellbeing.

Collectively, these empirical indicators substantiate the theoretical claim that advanced capitalism has "hijacked and objectified our very subjectivity" through systems of exploitation, control, and marginalization. The quantitative evidence reveals capitalism not as an abstract economic arrangement but as a concrete set of power relations that shape material conditions, social organization, environmental outcomes, and psychological experience. This statistical

reality underscores bell hooks' (1999) assertion about the "destructive way" in which systems of exploitation penetrate "the very ground of our being," validating the urgency of understanding how critical consciousness develops to challenge these conditions. By recognizing these empirical patterns, we establish a foundation for examining how social movements foster the awareness and agency needed to imagine and construct alternatives to the documented harms of the current system.

History, however, has long offered a long-standing case study for upending and abolishing systems of oppression that concentrate power and resources in the hands of a few, often at the expense of the many. For centuries, social movements for Black liberation have engaged in contestations against logic and practices of white supremacist capitalistic domination, providing past and contemporary movements a standard through which to produce new tactics for social change (DuBois, 1935; Robinson, 1983; Morris, 1986). One can trace the vectors of white supremacist colonialism that catalyzed the African slave trade retrospectively and note that a vast majority of emancipatory battles for sovereignty were done so through the organizing of working-class Black and Brown peoples, forming the impetus of social movements and regimes to produce counterhegemonic social, economic, and political frameworks shaping society (Prashad, 2007; Zinn, 1980). As Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois acknowledged, "the emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor, and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown, and black" (Du Bois, 1935, p. 16). These words have maintained their relevance for more than a century. In theory and practice, social movements embody resistance to oppressive circumstances and manifest as a vehicle for aggrieved groups to define and institute politics uniquely tailored to their lived conditions and ethics. When successful, this promotes epistemologies, practices, and language that defy the plight of white

supremacist capitalism. In the case of the centuries-long fight for black liberation, social movements incarnate through the mobilization of value systems of the marginalized, creating vehicles to decouple the oppressed body from social prescriptions of inferiority and whiteness to normativity in the production of new value systems in the battle against modern sociopolitical machines of oppression. And understanding the underlying interactional processes by which these hegemonic machines are short-circuited to pave for a new social order has never been more critical than in our contemporary.

Despite the dynamism inherent in social movements, contemporary literature offers limited insight into the interactional processes that drive their emergence and energy. In contrast, foundational social movement theory (late 19th to mid-20th century) primarily explained mobilization through collective behavior and relative deprivation, often portraying movements as reactions to social strain and participants as irrational. While more recent frameworks like "cognitive liberation" and "strategic framing" (cf. McAdam et al., 2012) attempt to explain movement dynamics, they often flatten these interactive processes into static mechanisms, neglecting the iterative dialectic that can awaken radicalism in those initially uninvolved (Melucci, 1989). Consequently, this research aims to explore the interactive, relational dynamics that social movements comprise. In this section, I will discuss the latest findings in conceptual social movement literature dealing with collective identity, a concept often entangled with notions and processes of transformations in consciousness, theories and philosophical insights spanning racial capitalism, critical race theory, emancipatory education, and Freirean conscientization, which serve as sensitizing concepts to guide the study's exploration of how social movement actors transmogrify subjugated consciousness to radical engagement, and connect this discourse to the general aims and objectives of this study.

Contemporary Context: Critical Pedagogy and Social Movements in an Age of Neoliberal Crisis

To understand the significance of researching social movement mobilization, it is important to recognize the demands the contemporary neoliberal context places on marginalized communities, educational institutions, and collective action frameworks. The intensification of market-based governance, privatization of public services, and individualization of social problems has fundamentally altered the landscape in which social movements operate, requiring new theoretical tools and practical strategies for contesting power. As neoliberal policies exacerbate inequality and precarity while simultaneously fragmenting traditional sites of resistance, social movements must navigate complex tensions between addressing immediate material needs and pursuing transformative systemic change.

Cho (2010) identifies a fundamental shift in how social movements have evolved since the mid-20th century, noting that

"the New Social Movement differs from the Old social movement of the 1930s in several ways. The significant change is the shift in the focus of social movements. It is no longer simply capitalism, or economic inequality and exploitation, but rather the totality of the system" (p. 319).

This broader focus has emerged in response to what Withers (2024) characterizes as the unique historical conditions under which anti-oppressive organizations like DSA attempt to build socialism in "the most militarily and economically powerful empire on the planet" (Withers, 2024, p. 1). To understand contemporary critical consciousness development, we must consider

the historical evolution of social movements since World War II. Cho (2010) traces how the New Left emerged in the 1960s with distinctive characteristics that differentiated it from the Old Left of the 1930s. Drawing on Teodori's (1969) analysis, Cho explains that the New Left prioritized personal freedom and human liberation as economic and social institutions increasingly defined every aspect of citizens' lives. This shift manifested in expressions of individual moral revolt and desires for self-realization, self-expression, and personal autonomy (pp. 318-319).

By the 1960s, traditional anti-capitalist movements based on class struggle had lost much of their appeal, and broader skepticism emerged about the possibility of creating transformative social orders. Cho (2010) attributes this skepticism to the failures of major socialist and revolutionary projects. The Soviet experiment, with the rise of Stalinism and subsequent invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, disillusioned many Western leftists who had viewed the USSR as a viable alternative to capitalism. Simultaneously, the disappointments of post-colonial nation-building in the Third World, where liberation movements often gave way to dictatorships and corrupt states, as Fanon (1963) had warned, further undermined confidence in systemic transformation. By the 1970s and 1980s, as developing nations struggled with economic crises and political instability instead of achieving promised modernization, faith in large-scale social change diminished considerably (pp. 318-319).

According to Cho (2010), this widespread disillusionment with systemic approaches marked a pivotal shift toward identity politics as an alternative form of political praxis. With fundamental social transformation appearing neither feasible nor necessarily desirable, focus turned inward toward self-development and identity-based organizing. As Sanbonmatsu (2004) observes in Cho's analysis, this period "effected a shift in tone or style in Western praxis, one

that decisively privileged emotive and aesthetic expression of an inner, 'radical' nature over considerations of strategy, theoretical coherence, or the patient construction of a counter-hegemonic movement" (p. 319). This shift gave rise to movements organized around gender, race, sexuality, and disability, representing a move away from broad social activism toward more personalized politics what Lerner (2006) characterizes as building "a moral man" rather than a moral society (Cho, 2010, p. 319).

The rise of neoliberalism as a dominant political-economic paradigm has further shaped the context for critical consciousness development. Giroux (2005) provides a crucial analysis of how neoliberalism functions not just as an economic doctrine but as a comprehensive worldview that reshapes social relations and subjectivity itself. He argues that "neoliberalism has become the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment" because it "removes economics and markets from the discourse of social obligations and social costs" (p. 2). For Giroux, neoliberalism transforms citizens into consumers, public goods into private commodities, and collective welfare into individual responsibility.

This neoliberal context creates specific challenges for developing critical consciousness. As Giroux (2005) observes, "Under neoliberalism, the language of the market becomes the language of common sense, and the obligations of citizenship are reduced to the act of consuming" (p. 4). This market rationality infiltrates all aspects of life, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to recognize the systemic nature of social problems or imagine alternatives to market-based solutions. Giroux further argues that "as neoliberal ideology, policies, and modes of governing increasingly dominate all aspects of social life, a shift has taken place in how young people understand their future, social responsibility, and the

obligations of citizenship" (p. 6). This shift represents a profound barrier to critical consciousness development, as individuals increasingly internalize market logic as natural and inevitable.

Similarly, the historical context presents nuanced impediments in the way of anti-racist, anti-oppressive social movements in the development of grassroots critical consciousness. As Withers (2024) argues, "neither European parliamentarism nor revolutionary vanguardism can guide us in our fight against the most powerful bourgeois 'democracy' history has ever seen." The traditional paths to social transformation—whether through electoral politics or revolutionary overthrow—appear foreclosed in the American context by the entrenched two-party system, the militarization of the state, and the deep integration of corporate power into governance structures.

This research agenda takes place at a time when, as McLaren (2020) writes, we are witnessing "the pornography of our lives" in the form of "the disrespect for popular classes, the indecent salaries paid to teachers in basic education, the lack of respect for public property, the excesses of government, unemployment, destitution, and hunger" (p. 1245). These conditions create both urgency and opportunity for developing critical consciousness. Urgency because of the escalating crises of capitalism, climate change, and authoritarianism; opportunity because these contradictions create what this study identified as "catalytic experiences" that can initiate critical consciousness development.

The historical tendencies Cho (2010) identifies, combined with Giroux's (2005) analysis of neoliberalism, continue to shape how critical consciousness develops within contemporary social movements and must be understood to develop effective approaches to fostering

transformative awareness and action that can overcome the limitations of both class-reductionist and identity-reductionist approaches.

Understanding the Emergence and Maintenance of Social Movements

Academic discourse spanning sociology, psychology, social work, and social movement studies has long sought to answer a fundamental question in investigating grassroots regimes for change: *how* do they happen (Cerulo, 1997; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Fominaya, 2018)?

Theoretical prescriptions and empirical investigations leading up to the 20th century ushered in a wave of discourse that struggled to conceive of collective human agency amidst institutional networks that both shaped and constrained the production of new cultures, meanings, and identities (Melucci, 1995). However, the unparalleled surge of cultural protest movements in the mid-20th century would trouble limiting structuralist analyses of social movements, which obscured their social processes. Melucci (1995) delved deeply into this conundrum:

"I consider collective action as the result of purpose, resources, and limits as a purposive orientation constructed by means of social relationships within a system of opportunities and constraints. It therefore cannot be considered either the simple effect of structural preconditions or the expression of values and beliefs. Individuals acting collectively 'construct' their action by means of 'organized' investments: they define in cognitive terms the field of possibilities they perceive while at the same time activating their relationships to give sense to their 'being together' and to the goals, they pursue...the definition that the actors construct is not linear but produced by interaction, negotiation, and the opposition of different orientations" (p. 43).

Looking at social movements through an interactional lens offers a different perspective than traditional structural approaches such as strain theory, resource mobilization, and political process theory. These traditional approaches tend to treat concepts like "cognitive liberation" (McAdam, 1982; 2022) and "collective action frames" (Vicari, 2010) as static structural components attached to social movements. In contrast, an interactional view reveals social movements as vibrant entities. They are animated by diverse groups of individuals connected through solidarity built on shared cognitive processes. This contrasts with the idea of individuals being compelled to act solely by structural opportunities and constraints. Furthermore, emotional investments play a crucial role, fostering similar understandings of the movement's collective efforts, its potential and limitations, and the broader sociopolitical context in which it operates. (Melucci, 1995, p. 43).

Specifically, the late 20th century played host to a pioneering discourse concerning tactics for revolution portraying how historically marginalized communities co-construct collectives of resistance. New social movement theories emerged around the 1960s. These theories generally view social movements as being involved in an ongoing process of reimagining both political and cultural landscapes (Melucci, 1995). This process includes solidifying the boundaries of cultural identity within the movement. It also involves questioning existing distributions of material resources. Importantly, these theories emphasize symbolic interactionism as an active process shaping social movement behavior, demands, and tactics (Buechler, 1995).

Contemporary social movement theorists suggest an under-researched but powerful galvanizer for social movement socialization and mobilization is collective identity (Jasper, 1997; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Jasper & McGarry, 2015). This process involves a reimagining of perceptions that is then directed into grassroots action and is grounded in the continuous construction of an

individual's sense of dis-alignment with the existing social order (Gage, 2018). Yet, the process by which this "identity work" (Jasper & McGarry, 2015, p.1) is facilitated and maintained has received little attention from social movement scholars (Tarlau, 2014; Kuk & Tarlau, 2020) and has struggled to delineate what collective identity is as an operating concept in social movement activity (Fominya, 2018).

If what society does is steeped in how it conceives certain peoples, practices, and ciphers in the perpetuation of social practices (Fanon, 2008; Chomsky, 1968; Zimbardo, 2007; DuBois, 1935), social movements act as engines for producing new symbolic representations and the emancipation of society from normalized injustices (Melucci, 1989; Touraine, 1981). Consequently, social movement studies must render the processes responsible for attending to political, economic, and social estrangement by focusing directly on how social movements dismantle the social totalities supporting these systems in the production of affirmative politics (Gage, 2018) and transcend the structuralist preoccupation that has stagnated social movement research pursuits (Melucci, 1995). But by what interactional, dialogic processes do social movements imbue constituents of the public sphere with liberatory grammars and practices for new affirmative politics? In this respect, the following study is guided by the following core research questions: What conditions within anti-oppressive social movement organizations, such as ATLDSA NWGA, promote the emergence and sustainability of critical consciousness among their members? What conditions within these organizations facilitate the challenge and dismantling of oppressive internalized beliefs?

This study investigates how this occurs interactionally and relationally within social movement organizational spaces of anti-oppression, environments where shared experiences of oppression are voiced, analyzed, and transformed into collective visions for liberation.

Historically, these spaces, whether ensconced within the black churches responsible for the success of the 1960's U.S. nonviolent civil rights movement or Knitting Nannas knitting sessions, they have been key to unraveling and destabilizing the socioeconomic value systems where sociopolitical systems of oppression find their fundamental root (Robinson, 2000; Rodney, 2018; hooks, 1994). By exploring the interactional roots that propel these movements, this study hopes to uncover the conditions galvanizing these critical interactional processes.

Conceptual Background

Collective Identity and Hegemonic Culture

Alberto Melucci (1989) defines collective identity as both "an interaction and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientations of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their action takes place" (p. 34). It is a shared cognitive schema through which emotions like shame, anger, and moral outrage are transformed into concrete mobilization (Britt and Heise, 2000). Functioning as a fundamental principle, this shared definition simultaneously motivates existing members to action and guides their engagement through established methods endorsed by their social movement organizations to mobilize activities challenging dominant power structures (Tilly, 1998). However, it requires consistent re-evaluations and negotiations as new individuals are assimilated into the social movement body, collective identities are questioned, labels are interrogated, and the collective becomes culturally and ideologically more diverse with the successes of cultural re-frames (Melucci, 1995; Institute for Precarious Consciousness, 2014). Furthermore, this decision-making process is not solely based on rational calculation; instead, it is often shaped by emotional solidarity with the social movement's cause and feelings of

belonging that connect individual grievances to a collective strategic approach for achieving change (Jasper, 2011). As collective identity is maintained and solidified, a social movement's network structure grows more robust, responsive, and capable of leveraging power for social change (Klandermans, 2014; Jasper, 2015).

Case studies of successful social movements offer valuable insights into how internal re-evaluations, identity shifts, and network development contribute to their achievements. For instance, the #istayathome movement in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how a collective identity, driven by cohesion and solidarity, could be rapidly formed and mobilized through calculative practices on social media (Torre et al., 2021). The Hong Kong pro-democracy protests showcased the crucial role of data infrastructure in facilitating mobilizing social media messaging and challenging state authority (Milan & Beraldo, 2024). The "radical flank effect," observed in movements like animal rights and climate activism, illustrates how seemingly radical actions by one faction can inadvertently increase support for more moderate groups within the same movement, showcasing that these identity shifts can transcend organizational bounds (Simpson et al., 2022). These cases highlight that successful movements often exhibit adaptability, strong internal cohesion built on a clear collective identity, the ability to build and leverage networks, and strategic responses to the prevailing political and cultural context.

In whatever case, this "identity work" is not merely changing directionless, politically disinterested bystanders into radicalized members of a collective social movement. This process also involves contending with a mind always-already penetrated by a dynamic set of principles reinforced by years of life besieged by capitalism. Identities form the basis for political power and oppression (Gamson, 1995, p. 391). Identity serves as both the basis of systemic oppression,

through the categorization and marginalization of social groups and the foundation of political power, as collective identities enable people to recognize injustice, build solidarity, and mobilize for change. These epistemologies, the conceptual targets of social movement identity work, have been engineered and woven into the guiding status quo through a steady diet of "postulates, a series of propositions that slowly and subtly...work their way into one's mind and shape one's view of the world in which one belongs" (Fanon, 2008, p. 152). These culturally dominant worldviews reflect the preeminent social, economic, and political framework of which it is constituted, defined by the global reality of capitalism. Capitalism, which organizes patterns and pathways of production and consumption, dominates every facet of private and public life and is sustained by a social ordering supported by "founding myths" through the use of "print and press" that functioned to "legitimate the social orders that came into being" (Robinson, 2000). Values that undergird capitalism's foundational pillars--neoliberalism, militarism, and imperialism-- become imprinted in identities and anchored in personalities, so much so that the deleterious by-products of advanced capitalism seem to be natural tendencies of reality.

This systematized, pervasive process by which the ruling elite domesticates human consciousness is functional and intentional. As Noam Chomsky explains through the example of mass media,

"the mass media serve as a system for communicating messages to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systemic propaganda" (Chomsky & Herman, 1988, p.1).

As suggested above, this deeply embedded allegiance to capitalism is produced through a pedagogical process in which neoliberal values are internalized even by those most exploited by the system: those whose labor sustains it and who would stand to gain the most from its transformation. Knowledge is a constant site of political contestation; the power to label is the ability to control an individual's, a group's, or a nation-state's form and behavior (Foucault, 1980). It is a battle that is waged every second of every day on the battlefields of the media, the classroom, and the therapist's office, where the personal subjectivities of consumers collide with the authoritative epistemologies embodied by a motley of institutional agents and symbols of the bourgeoisie. From the top down, this compulsory curriculum is enforced with every landslide victory of the elite, neoliberal dominant worldview, as the interests of the ruling class cement themselves deeper into the everyday lives of the general public, including and at the expense of exploited and racialized working-class groups.

From a Marxist perspective, this phenomenon reflects the ideological function of the superstructure, wherein dominant ideas such as individualism, meritocracy, and free-market rationality are disseminated through institutions like education, media, and religion to maintain the capitalist mode of production (Marx & Engels, 2016). Ideology, in this sense, is not merely a set of beliefs but a material force that shapes consciousness and reproduces social relations. As Althusser (1971) argues, ideological state apparatuses operate through a form of "interpellation," hailing individuals into subject positions that align with capitalist interests, even when doing so contradicts their material well-being. Thus, knowledge itself becomes a site of political contestation, where the ruling class's ability to define common sense and legitimate knowledge obscures the exploitative relations at the core of capitalist society. In this way, the pedagogical

reach of capitalism not only disciplines the body through labor but also captures the mind, foreclosing the very conditions necessary for revolutionary consciousness to emerge.

All at once, social movement operators involved in social movement “identity work” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285) confront the material forces of the values, concepts, and social scripts of an adversarial system ensconced in the collective mind of those they seek to inspire and recruit. These facilitators embark upon a sustained battle against customs of indoctrination pivotal to perpetuating advanced capitalism. Historically, social movement actors confront capitalistic indoctrination through targeted popular education strategies, as demonstrated by organizations like the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil, the Highlander Folk School, and the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA). Drawing on Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientização*, these groups create dialogical learning spaces that challenge dominant capitalist narratives by fostering critical consciousness among marginalized communities, whether through rural education programs, civil rights training, or worker organizing. The Highlander Center's work with civil rights activists, the MST's autonomous rural schools, and the NDWA's political education initiatives exemplify how movements systematically deconstruct neoliberal assumptions about individual responsibility, labor value, and social hierarchies (Horton & Freire, 1990; Kane, 2010; Boris & Fish, 2014). By centering lived experiences and collective storytelling, these organizations directly challenge the individualistic and commodifying logics of capitalist systems.

This is a custom of contemporary social movement organizations in the current stage of late-stage capitalism, where everything becomes an objectifiable commodity to be merchandised and made fuel for the perpetuation of the metropole (Marx, 2011). Under the ideological control of this framework, educational spaces can become sites of subjugating propaganda (Horkheimer

& Aronowitz, 1972). The pervading culture assimilates all to market fundamentalism and is an industry that reinforces consumption and punishes deviation through a dynamic system of manufactured poverty and sociopolitical alienation (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Ideological hegemony can all at once be maintained, not only through policing and militaristic institutions but through a wide array of cultural institutions that serve as its apparatus (Gramsci, 1971). For example, media portrayals often emphasize individual success within the existing capitalist framework, subtly reinforcing the idea that social mobility is solely the result of personal effort, thus obscuring systemic inequalities (Lin, 2023). Similarly, educational curricula may prioritize certain historical narratives and societal values that align with the interests of the dominant group, contributing to the naturalization of the status quo (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 1983). Social movement activists battle a system perfected in its ability to propagate allegiance and incarcerate human freedom.

Capitalism, Oppression, and the Culture of the Manichean Binary

An operating feature of capitalistic hegemony is the oppressive binary by which humanity is spliced and separated according to false dichotomies of good and evil, civilized and barbaric, redeemable and irredeemable. Frantz Fanon elaborates on this theory undergirding sociopolitical oppression famously in his conception of the colonial Manichean logic:

"The colonial world is a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say, with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation, the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better never existed, in the colonial world. The native is

declared insensible to ethics; he represents only the absence of values, but also the negation of values...he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces" (Fanon, 1961. P. 38)

In his analysis, this term refers to the colonial system's tendency to create absolute, binary oppositions that divide the world into two irreconcilable halves: the colonizer and the colonized. This binary thinking is not just a simple division, but a deeply structured system of oppression that dehumanizes people, creates separation between the colonizer and the colonized, and establishes a hierarchical worldview where the colonizer is defined as inherently superior and the colonized inherently inferior. Similarly, Fanon argued that this Manichean logic is a core mechanism of colonialist oppression, accomplished through the creation of a psychologically milieu where the colonized are systematically denied their humanity (Fanon, 1961). Fanon, in his breakdown of the logic that undergirds colonial, and thus capitalistic, philosophy, contends that the main building blocks of an oppressed society and, therefore, an individual's position within the hierarchy hinges on where one is located on the binary, categories that relate in perpetual opposition and conflict. And specific to the economic structures of capitalism, it has been the scheme by which Black communities are systematically expropriated as opportunities for cheap and compulsory labor, the lifeblood of capitalism.

Manichean binaries serve as the fuel for social relations of production of capitalism as a globalized phenomenon. Building upon this understanding of Manichean binaries as a driving force in capitalist relations, W.E.B. Du Bois offered a compelling analysis of how racial hierarchies, specifically the "Color Line," function as a key mechanism for perpetuating capitalist exploitation and undermining democracy. And it is this complex today which more

than anything else excuses the suppression of democracy, not only in Asia and Africa but in Europe and the Americas” (Du Bois, 1975, p. 293). Although the application of the racial binary in virtue of the accumulation of wealth differs through time and space, it has long existed to “defend human slavery and caste, and even defeat democratic government in its own boundaries, ostensibly because of an inferior race, but really to make profits out of cheap labor, both black and white (Du Bois, 1975, p. 293). The global history of capitalism depicts the robust, ceaseless development of a sociopolitical system built upon “alienations and separations embedded within a world view of individualism, maximization of material gain, and processes of subjectification” based in “an instrumental and indifferent relationship to nature, denial of ‘other’ worldviews and devaluing of the emotional and the disembodied” (Motta & Esteves, 2014, pgs. 1-2). Again, the United States provides a stark example of the interrelation between the two sociological systems:

“As systems of manufacturing, plantation slavery, and farming had closed together into an integrated national economy sharing the exploitation of land, labor, and natural resources, the social ideology and historical consciousness of the ruling class acquired two domestic enemies, the Indian, and the Negro...and once the native American peoples became incapable of resistance, they were further transformed and trivialized...the African remained a substantial labor force for the further development of the country” (Robinson, 2000, p. 187).

The dynamic persists today, calcified in rampant wage theft by multibillion-dollar corporations, the prison industrial complex as a de facto slavery system (Davis & Shaylor, 2001; Alexander, 2010), unchecked wealth and income inequality in Black and other historically marginalized

communities, and a policing force that since its creation has maintained allegiance to the surveillance, brutalization, and destruction of non-white bodies.

Du Bois's (1975) examination of how racial binaries reinforce capitalist structures finds a parallel in the way patriarchal gender hierarchies operate within the same capitalist system that shapes Western and global society, utilizing a similar Manichean logic to create and maintain economic inequalities. Patriarchy, as a system of male dominance, also relies on a fundamental Manichean division between men and women, assigning distinct and unequal values and roles (Walby, 1989). Men are historically and culturally associated with the public sphere, production, rationality, and authority, while women are relegated to the private sphere, reproduction, emotionality, and subservience. This binary not only justifies the control of women's labor, both within the household and in the paid workforce where their work is often undervalued (Blau & Kahn, 2017), but also reinforces capitalist accumulation by creating a cheaper labor pool (Hartmann, 1981). The devaluation of "feminine" labor and the unpaid reproductive work that sustains the workforce (Federici, 2004) are crucial for lowering the overall costs of production within a capitalist framework. This hierarchical division, rooted in a dehumanizing binary that positions women as secondary (de Beauvoir, 1949), thus serves the economic imperatives of capitalism by maintaining unequal power relations and exploiting gendered labor disparities.

Just as racial and patriarchal binaries serve to uphold capitalist structures within Western and global society, so too does the framework of cisgender heteronormativity function through a comparable Manichean logic to create and sustain economic inequalities within this dominant system, establishing a binary between cisgender heterosexual identities and LGBTQIA+ identities that results in significant social, political, and economic ramifications for the latter.

Another system of oppression prevalent in Western capitalist society is heterosexism. Heterosexism operates through a dominant Manichean logic that constructs a binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality, with heterosexuality positioned as the natural, normal, and superior form of sexuality (Rubin, 1984). This normative system privileges cisgender heterosexual individuals and relationships, often leading to discriminatory laws, policies, and social practices that limit LGBTQIA+ people's access to resources, rights, and opportunities in areas such as employment, housing, healthcare, and family recognition (Herek, 2007).

The marginalization and othering of LGBTQIA+ individuals within this framework not only perpetuates social stigma and political exclusion but also contributes to economic disparities, hindering their full participation and advancement within the capitalist system (Badgett et al., 2019). By marginalizing and often criminalizing non-heterosexual identities and relationships, heterosexism reinforces a specific social order that aligns with traditional notions of family and property, which have been central to capitalist development (Foucault, 1990; Rich, 1980). Furthermore, the othering of LGBTQ+ individuals can lead to their economic marginalization, creating vulnerabilities that can be exploited within the labor market (Badgett et al., 2019). This Manichean division thus supports capitalist structures by naturalizing certain forms of social organization and creating hierarchies that can be economically advantageous for the dominant group.

Expanding on the notion that racial, patriarchal, and cisgender heteronormative binaries function within the capitalist system to create and maintain inequalities, ableism operates through a similar Manichean logic, establishing a binary between able-bodiedness and disability that generates significant social, political, and economic disadvantages for disabled individuals.

This normative framework privileges able-bodiedness as the ideal, often leading to the marginalization, exclusion, and dehumanization of those with disabilities across various societal domains (Davis, 1995). Disability, conversely, is often associated with dependence, incapacity, and a lack of productivity within a capitalist framework that prioritizes individual contribution to the market. This binary logic devalues the lives and potential contributions of disabled individuals, often leading to their exclusion from the workforce, education, and other spheres of economic and social life (Schur et al., 2017). This exclusion not only denies disabled people economic opportunities but also reinforces the capitalist emphasis on an idealized, unimpaired worker. The societal perception of disabled individuals as "burdens" can also deflect attention from systemic barriers (Oliver, 1990) and the need for accessible and inclusive structures that would enable their participation, thus maintaining the status quo of a capitalist system that often prioritizes profit over equitable inclusion (McRuer, 2006; Garland-Thomson, 2016).

In sum, racism, patriarchy, cisgender heteronormativity, and ableism, each operating through a fundamental Manichean logic of binary division and devaluation, are not isolated forms of oppression but rather interlocking systems deeply intertwined with and supportive of capitalist accumulation (Federici, 2012; Collins, 1990). These oppressions create and reinforce hierarchies that cheapen labor, regulate social reproduction, and marginalize specific populations, thereby facilitating the exploitation necessary for capitalist expansion. Research on social movement organizing highlights that effective anti-oppressive movements often embody principles of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), recognizing the interconnected nature of these oppressions and working to build coalitions across different identity groups (Taylor, 2018). Studies on successful social change initiatives demonstrate that movements adopting inclusive strategies and addressing multiple forms of inequality simultaneously are more effective in

challenging systemic power structures (Khan, 2024). Consequently, anti-oppressive social movements frequently work in tandem, advocating for intersectional approaches that address the simultaneous and compounding effects of multiple forms of marginalization to create a more just and equitable society that challenges the very foundations upon which capitalist exploitation thrives (Smith, 2005).

The Frankfurt School and the Promise of Educational Emancipation

The Frankfurt School was a group of intellectuals, academics, and political revolutionists founded in the early 20th century after World War I. Critical of the prevailing socioeconomic landscape typified by growing European capitalist fascism and the inadequacies of maturing communist nation-states, the School devoted much of its academic dynamism toward robust critiques of the contemporary political, economic, and social landscape and investigations of the conditions for social change. Braiding the principal components of Freudian, Marxist, and Hegelian theoretical frameworks, the School nurtured a dialectical framework to problematize the limits of contemporary social theory and expose the linkages between the institutions that structure society, human behavior, and the logic of globalized capitalism. As Frankfurt School disciple Max Horkheimer elaborated, this analytic framework involved sociological analyses that probed “the interconnection between the economic life of society, the psychic development of the individual, and transformations in the realm of culture” exuded in institutions of “science, art, and religion, but also law, ethics, fashion, public opinion, sport, amusement, life style, etc” (Horkheimer, 1993, p. 8).

To penetrate and destabilize a social system based on domination and subjugation, constantly replicated through social expectations and social relations of production in capitalism, engagement with the ideologies that give this institutional framework its legitimacy was deemed

crucial. According to political theorist and Frankfurt School acolyte Herbert Marcuse, this intervention must be anchored in the process of critical education:

“it is precisely the preparatory character of [education] that gives it its historical significance: to develop, in the exploited, the consciousness (and the unconsciousness) which would loosen the hold of enslaving needs over their existence—the needs which perpetuated their dependence on the system of exploitation” (Marcuse, 1971).

This form of education was the imperative task through which the human subject uncloaks and breaks through institutions of domination that produced human misery sustained through the logic of racism and colonialism (Lamont, 2009; Fanon, 2008).

The dominant worldview that supports capitalism, as a pedagogy in and of itself, is learned through a compulsory curriculum achieved by its human and institutional agents through a complex of messaging, expectations, mechanisms of coercion, and performance systems (Motta & Esteves, 2014). Untangling human subjectivity from this training requires the same process, through a curriculum of unlearning and rebirth, “after one has resisted, there is the necessity to become—to make oneself anew...that process emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one’s life, as one reinvents alternative habits of being and resists from marginalized space of difference inwardly defined” (hooks, 1999, p. 15). Emancipation requires both an outward and inward dismantling of the sociopolitical institutions and cognitive scripts cultivated by the longstanding rubric of capitalism and its auxiliary binaries, which organize the rules of engagement.

Emancipatory Radicalism and Anti-Oppressive Social Movements

According to Fanon, the process of resisting Manichean logic begins at a metaphysical scale. Fanon employed dialectic concepts from Hegelian and Marxist theory to describe the required process for overcoming the adamant nature of Manichean racist ideology (Bhabha, in Fanon, 1986: xxiii). This dialogic process through which racist societal influence diminishes, society's meaning system shifts, and substitute markers underpinning "the metaphysics of good and evil" are fundamentally refused (Sekyi-Otu, 1996, p. 116). This battle constitutes the dialogic process in which marginalizing, tacit presumptions steeped in racist tropes that influence how social relations and material distributions are organized can be dismantled and revamped through the process of emancipation, acknowledging the unique way racism seeps into every aspect of reality. Truth and reality, in Fanon's view, truth and reality are not established in absolutes or clear-cut circumstances but are situational and need constant re-evaluation beginning at this metaphysical level.

Theoretically and empirically, anti-racist movements for black liberation have historically commanded concessions from state apparatuses ensconced within historical and contemporary capitalist colonies by unraveling mythological binaries oppressive systems derive as its fundamental basis (Robinson, 2000; DuBois, 1935; Rodney, 2018). Examples abound throughout history. Leading the only successful slave revolt in human history, enslaved revolutionaries, including Toussaint Louverture, defeated age-old prescriptions of black inferiority and impotence, mustering up a level of solidarity effective enough to liberate Haiti from a century of French imperialism in 1804 (James, 1989). Organizing space for Black families in need turned away from Chicago's white-dominated social service network, Ida B. Wells educated and trained historically sidelined black women on the United States political process, registering them to

vote, training them in canvassing and empowering them to seize the reigns of their sociopolitical reality in a battle against white supremacist patriarchy. Employing the Black church's social resources, charismatic leadership, financial resources, and doctrinal framework turned apathy, anguish, and wrath into a focused collective consciousness favorable to social change (Morris, 1986; DuBois, 1899). The Black Panther Party, while providing adult and youth food programs to households ravaged by the myriad functions of American racism, assembled liberation schools anchored in a curriculum of basic literacy and emancipatory education, disentangling black minds chained to a Manichean binary legitimizing their systemic and generational subjugation.

Feminist movements, drawing on theoretical frameworks like socialist feminism (Hartmann, 1981) and radical feminism (Firestone, 2003), have historically challenged the systemic nature of patriarchy and its impact on women's social, political, and economic lives. Empirically, the women's suffrage movement achieved significant legal change, while subsequent waves of feminism have fought for equal pay, reproductive rights, and an end to gender-based violence, demonstrating the power of collective action in challenging patriarchal structures in the workplace, family, and legal systems (Davis, 2008). Contemporary feminist organizing continues to address intersectional oppressions, recognizing how patriarchy interacts with racism, classism, and other inequalities, utilizing strategies from grassroots activism to policy advocacy to dismantle male dominance and achieve gender justice (hooks, 2000).

LGBTQIA+ rights movements, informed by queer theory (Butler, 1990) and social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), have challenged the presumed naturalness and superiority of cisgender heterosexuality and its role in marginalizing non-normative sexualities and gender identities. Empirically, the Stonewall Riots are a pivotal example of resistance against state-sanctioned discrimination, leading to the growth of LGBTQIA+ advocacy

organizations that have fought for decriminalization, marriage equality, and anti-discrimination laws, demonstrating the impact of direct action and legal strategies (Duberman, 1994). Current movements continue to address issues of trans rights, intersectional discrimination within the LGBTQIA+ community, and the dismantling of systemic heteronormativity in cultural, legal, and social institutions through education, political organizing, and community building (Namaste, 2000).

Disability rights movements, grounded in the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) and critical disability theory (Swain & French, 2000), have contested the individualistic and medicalized understanding of disability, highlighting instead the societal barriers that create disablement. Empirically, the activism surrounding Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in the US demonstrated the effectiveness of direct action and collective advocacy in demanding legal protections and access (Shapiro, 1993). Contemporary disability justice movements, often led by disabled people themselves, advocate for inclusive design, universal access, deinstitutionalization, and an end to ableist violence and discrimination across all spheres of life, recognizing the intersectionality of disability with other marginalized identities and employing strategies ranging from policy reform to cultural change (Mingus, 2017).

These movements collectively reveal a fundamental strategic approach: they do not merely seek inclusion within existing systems but fundamentally transform the conceptual frameworks that generate oppression. By refusing the binary logic of dominant power structures, they create spaces for more nuanced, intersectional understandings of human experience and social justice. The work of resistance, as Fanon understood it, is ultimately an ongoing process of critical consciousness, continually challenging the mythological binaries that sustain systems of domination.

Summary

This introductory chapter establishes the landscape of social movements within advanced capitalist frameworks characterized by exploitation, control, and marginalization. The chapter articulates the research problem: understanding how social movements facilitate critical consciousness and dismantle oppressive beliefs. Drawing on theorists like bell hooks, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Frantz Fanon, it examines how anti-oppressive social movements have historically contested white supremacist capitalist domination that fuel intersectional systems of oppression. The conceptual background explores collective identity formation within social movements, the Manichean binary that fuels capitalism, the Frankfurt School's emphasis on educational emancipation, and the historical precedents of emancipatory radicalism in anti-oppressive social movements. The chapter frames critical consciousness development as central to understanding how individuals transition from bystanders to radical participants in social change regimes. The following chapter will explore the theoretical frameworks that underpin this research, examining critical theories, social movement learning, and Freirean concepts of conscientization as they relate to anti-oppressive organizing.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Theory: Binary as Social Construct

Various forms of oppression, whether based on race, gender, sexuality, ability, or class, operate through similar mechanisms of binary thinking, social construction, and institutional enforcement (Collins, 1990; Foucault, 1977). These systems of domination function by establishing hierarchical dualisms that divide humanity into categories of superior/inferior, normal/deviant, or included/excluded, often presented as natural or inevitable distinctions rather than socially produced arrangements (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Said, 1978). Critical social theories across different domains share a fundamental insight: these binary constructions serve to naturalize inequality while obscuring the historical, economic, and political processes that create and maintain them (Marx, 2011; Scott, 1988).

According to social movement history and academic discourse, counteracting these forms of oppression requires multifaceted approaches that include consciousness-raising practices (Freire, 2000), collective meaning-making (Taylor, 1989), and praxis-oriented movement building (Gramsci, 1971). Through these processes, marginalized groups develop critical awareness of how binary thinking structures their experiences, denaturalize these Manichean divisions (Fanon, 1967), and create alternative frameworks for understanding social relations that can mobilize collective resistance (Zinn, 2002). This dialectical process of deconstruction and reconstruction serves as the foundation for transformative social movements that challenge not

only specific manifestations of oppression but also the intersecting systems of capitalism, colonialism, and domination that rely on these divisions to maintain hierarchical power arrangements (Davis, 1981; hooks, 2000).

Critical race theory contextualizes how racial binaries are made durable and manifest institutionally within the contemporary political, social, and economic landscape, exposing racism not only as a key component of Western capitalism, but a target of consciousness-raising tactics for social change. Critical race theories assert that race results from historical inequities between racial groupings in which whiteness has been dominant (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hill, 2008; Bell, 1992). The theory goes further to contend that race as a social construction and racial inequity as its epiphenomenon has penetrated everyday, political, cultural, and legal thought as a natural fact that obscures the manifestations of racism (Flores, 2018). Fanon's prescription for the interrogation and subversion of the racial binary echoes the critical race tradition that stresses the uncovering of "the ordinariness of racism as a daily experience" (Flores, 2018, p. 378-379).

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2018). Fanon's prescription for the interrogation and subversion of the racial binary echoes the critical race tradition that stresses the uncovering of "the ordinariness of racism as a daily experience" (Flores, 2018, p. 378-379).

The daily occurrences and institutional submergence of racism is an oppressive pedagogy whereby hegemonic arrangements impose normative prescriptions on social relationships and subjectivities that propel racial capitalism (Motta & Esteves, 2014). Through the lens of critical race theory, anti-racist counter-hegemonic revolution comprises a cognitive deconstruction and re-configuration process that frees the public sphere from the Manichean shackles of racism and colonialism. Although Fanon's prescription calls for, at the very least, theoretical mutiny against conceptual systems of marginalization, the procedure necessarily unfolds in a kinetic fashion when transgressive meanings are created via collective negotiation and recognition sustained through group action achieved through critical praxis (Crutchfield, 2018). Embedded within a Marxist analysis of the racial binary, this program of deconstruction serves as the precondition for interracial unity and working-class solidarity to generate aggregate collective people power to subvert the domination of global colonial capitalism in the institutional, cultural, and social spaces of human life (Du Bois, 1920).

Similarly, feminist theory has extensively theorized gender as a social construct that operates through binary thinking and institutional reinforcement. Feminist scholars have demonstrated how the male/female binary functions as a Manichean system that naturalizes gender inequality and obscures its socio-historical development (Butler, 1990; hooks, 2000). The gender binary, like racial categorization, serves as a mechanism for maintaining hierarchical power relations that benefit from the exploitation of women's labor, both productive and

reproductive (Federici, 2004). Feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s exemplified the process of collective meaning-making that challenged these naturalized binaries by creating spaces where women could articulate their experiences of oppression and recognize them as systemic rather than personal failings (MacKinnon, 1989). This practice of collective critical reflection directly challenges the capitalist tendency to atomize individuals and privatize suffering, demonstrating how consciousness-raising functions as a counter-hegemonic educational practice that makes visible the socially constructed nature of gender hierarchies (Fraser, 2013).

In parallel, queer theory has interrogated the hetero/homosexual binary as another socially constructed division that reinforces normative systems of power. Scholars like Sedgwick (1990) and Warner (1993) have analyzed how heteronormativity operates not merely as a personal preference but as an institutional system that privileges certain forms of relationships, families, and identities while marginalizing others. The binary thinking that positions heterosexuality as natural and homosexuality as deviant serves to maintain not only gender hierarchies but also capitalist family structures that facilitate the reproduction of labor (D'Emilio, 1983). LGBTQ+ movements have employed consciousness-raising strategies that parallel those of anti-racist and feminist movements, creating counter-publics where alternative ways of understanding sexuality and gender expression can be articulated, validated, and mobilized for social change (Berlant & Warner, 1998). These movements demonstrate how the deconstruction of binary thinking around sexuality functions as a necessary component of broader emancipatory politics.

Disability studies scholars have similarly challenged the able-bodied/disabled binary, revealing it as a social construct that naturalizes exclusion and discrimination (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Oliver, 1990). Rather than viewing disability as an inherent individual deficit, the social model of disability locates the problem in environments and institutions designed exclusively for normative bodies and minds. This theoretical reframing parallels the ways in which critical race theory and feminist theory denaturalize racial and gender hierarchies. Disability justice movements have engaged in consciousness-raising practices that transform individualized experiences of exclusion into collective political awareness about ableism as a system that intersects with capitalism's valuation of bodies based on productive capacity (Mingus, 2011). By revealing how the binary thinking that separates "normal" from "disabled" bodies serves capitalist exploitation, disability justice frameworks contribute to the broader project of dismantling Manichean logic across multiple dimensions of oppression.

Class analysis, emerging from Marxist traditions, offers perhaps the most direct critique of capitalism's binary divisions between owners and workers, productive and unproductive labor, valuable and disposable populations. Though class differs from other forms of oppression in that its ultimate goal is self-abolition rather than recognition, class-based movements have similarly employed consciousness-raising tactics to denaturalize economic hierarchies (Thompson, 1963). Labor education and worker centers have functioned as sites where atomized workers can develop class consciousness by collectively analyzing their exploitation and recognizing their potential power when organized (Aronowitz, 1992). These practices directly challenge capitalist ideology that frames economic outcomes as the result of individual merit rather than structured exploitation.

Consequently, a philosophical tradition that combines the deconstructive, dialectical nature of liberatory practice elaborated across these various dimensions of oppression with political engagement with the world to be transformed is crucial to pin down how critical consciousness, the ability to deconstruct and analyze systems of oppression to intervene against them, can be produced. In this confluence of education and social movement radicalism came the birth of the field of social movement learning, which examines how consciousness-raising practices operate across different movements to challenge Manichean binaries and develop the critical awareness necessary for transformative social action.

Social Movement Learning (SML) and Critical Pedagogy

Social Movement Learning (SML) is a field of study exploring how social movements facilitate learning and knowledge creation among participants. The origins of social movement learning can be traced back to the late 20th century, when scholars and empiricists began to study the role of social movements in promoting social and cognitive change alongside the birth of new social movement theories (Foley, 1999; Kilgore, 1999). The guiding assumptions of social movement learning are that social movements are sites of learning, that learning is a collective process, and that social movements facilitate the creation of new knowledge (Cunningham, 2000; Hill, 2004).

Social movement learning literature since the 1970's has identified Paulo Freire's notion of conscientização (or conscientization) as a process central to popular education by which learning unfolds within social movement spaces and social change begins to develop (Freire, 2000; Kuk & Tarlau, 2020). Conscientization (also referred to as consciousness-raising), the process of reaching critical consciousness, is defined as the "means by which the people, through a true praxis, leave behind the status of objects to assume the status of historical Subjects" (p.

160) by “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). The conceptual architecture that configures this approach to radical education is a valuable conceptual launch point in perceiving the dynamics inherent in catalyzing critical reflection and radical imagination to promote grassroots activity, particularly in how it operates within the broader approach of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is liberation as praxis, involving “the action of men and women upon their world to transform it” (Freire, 2000, p. 56), and is how critical consciousness is both achieved and deployed. Not only does the praxis parallel the legacy of successful social movements in the ongoing practice of liberating the marginalized from systems of oppression through hegemonic deconstruction, but Freire also developed this method of critical pedagogy from insights generated from a national literacy program he and local community organizations facilitated in Brazil for the local poor, born specifically from the rhythms of grassroots collectivization. Among many other components, the most critical included community meetings where organizers and program participants discussed persistent personal issues, shared space to identify the causes, and produced action plans to intervene in identified problems.

In particular, a new “popular education” method proved incredibly successful. Its primary goal was to rally and organize people to build collective power by interrogating and unlearning the distinction between “objects and subjects,” the chief binary the educational model intervened in. Subjects were people who believed they could engage and transform the world they lived in through their autonomy, significance as pillars of society, and self-actualization (Freire, 2000). Objects were people who had internalized the limits of their present circumstances and believed their status in life was to be acted on (Freire, 2000). To that end, popular education entailed community members and educators participating in sustained dialogue about the institutional and

cultural factors that impacted their lives to move from objects of these structures to subjects responsible for their production and perpetuation, called a “reading of the world.” Deployed in a wide variety and embedded within a rich tradition of social movements, ranging from the second-wave U.S. feminist movement of the 1960’s (Rosenthal, 1984) to contemporary social media activist practices (Choi et al., 2023), consciousness-raising has served as a valuable approach to transforming individuals entrenched in the harmful, subjugating discourses of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy into its greatest adversaries.

Building upon the individual and collective empowerment fostered by consciousness-raising, research demonstrates significant structural outcomes resulting from these endeavors. The shared critical awareness and politicized identities cultivated through this process often serve as a catalyst for the formation of social movement organizations and networks capable of engaging in collective action aimed at institutional change (McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 1998). Studies have shown that consciousness-raising initiatives can contribute to the development of new political discourses and frames that challenge dominant ideologies and create space for alternative understandings of social problems (Snow et al., 1986). Furthermore, the solidarity and collective agency generated through these experiences can lead to increased civic engagement, policy advocacy, and the mobilization of marginalized communities to demand structural reforms in areas such as law, education, and economic justice (Amenta et al., 2010; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Ultimately, consciousness-raising acts as a crucial foundational element for the sustained collective action necessary to achieve meaningful and lasting structural transformation.

The theoretical promise of critical pedagogies Freire (2000), with roots in Frankfurt School critical theory and Marxist critique of capitalism, stressed the importance a critically-engaged education had and continues to have in the paradigm-shifting capabilities of modern-day

social movement politics in his conceptualization of critical pedagogy and conscientization. Once united in understanding and conviction, Freire notes that the oppressed can form a transformative force with enough valence to re-produce the world (p. 145). The implications of transformative dialogue have energized critical discourses through the 21st century, particularly among social movement researchers. New social movement theorists have stressed the importance of investigating the cultural framing processes active in movement campaigns for collective identity consolidation and social change (Peterson, 1989; Buechler, 1995; Jasper, 2011), in particular, how objects of emotion, affect, and memory are leveraged to transform disengaged spectators of social change regimes to its coordinating agents.

Conscientization is not a linear, step-by-step process; instead, it involves several interrelated components, each contributing to the development of critical consciousness and ultimately leading to social action. It is guided by an iterative praxis. These components include:

Table 1

Components of Conscientization

Component	Description
Critical Consciousness	The awareness of one's social and political context, understanding the systemic and structural forces that shape one's life. This is the first step towards conscientization.
Reflection	An introspective process where individuals critically evaluate their experiences and societal conditions. Reflection is crucial to developing a deeper understanding of one's social reality.
Action (Praxis)	Action, or praxis, refers to making changes based on the insights gained from critical consciousness and reflection. It involves taking strategic steps to challenge and change oppressive structures and systems.
Dialogue	A process of open, democratic communication to share experiences and learn from each other, fostering a deeper understanding and collective critical consciousness.
Social Reality	This is the environment in which individuals exist. Conscientization aims to critically understand this reality, particularly its oppressive structures, to effect change.

These components are all critical constituent aspects of Freire's notion of conscientization. The features do not occur sequentially but inform and interact with each other in dynamic ways through which participants become critically aware of their environment and build the social bonds and collective power necessary to change it.

Conscientization and Social Movements

Paulo Freire's (2000) concept of conscientization is deeply connected to social movements and their study. Conscientization refers to the development of critical consciousness—a process through which individuals become aware of the social and political forces that influence their lives and societal conditions. This understanding leads to the urge to enact change, a fundamental tenet of social movements.

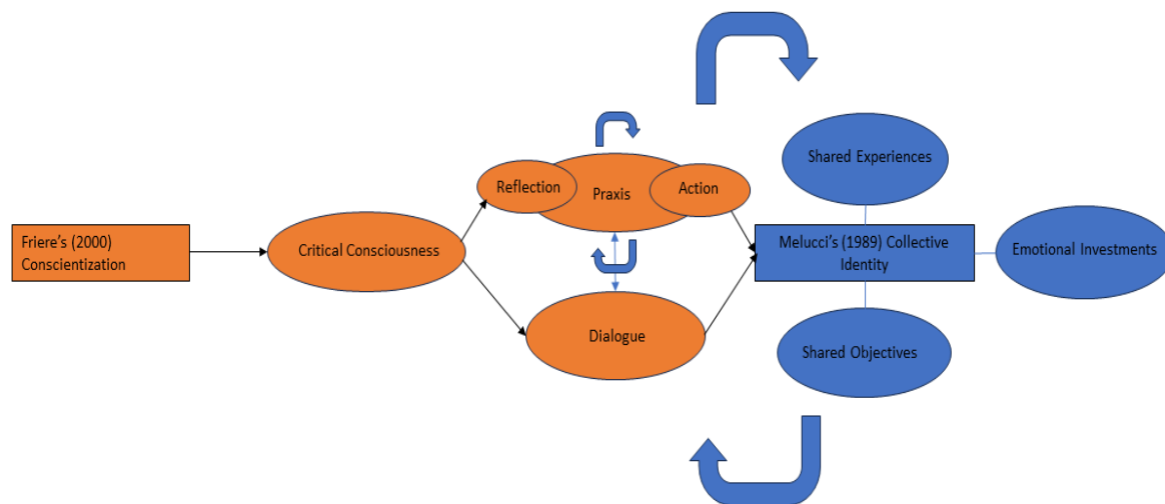
Social movements typically emerge as responses to perceived injustices and inequalities. They provide a space where conscientization can occur, fostering critical dialogue about societal conditions, power dynamics, and opportunities for transformation. Moreover, studying social movements through the lens of conscientization provides researchers with a theoretical framework to understand the process of social change, the (re) development of collective identities, and the complex dynamics of power and resistance within society.

Conscientization plays a critical role in social movement participation and collective identity formation. By fostering essential consciousness, individuals understand their societal conditions and become motivated to challenge these conditions. This increased awareness and motivation often spur individuals to join social movements and take collective action. As a

result, conscientization contributes to the formation of collective identities, which are crucial for the longevity and impact of social movements (Jasper, 2011; Juris, 2008; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Through dialogue, reflection, and praxis, individuals within a social movement begin to see their struggles and aspirations as shared, fostering a sense of unity and shared identity. This collective identity is a powerful force, motivating sustained participation and collective action toward social transformation. Figure 1 depicts a concept map showcasing the relationship between critical consciousness and collective identity.

Figure 1

Freire's (2000) Conscientization and Melucci's (1989) Collective Identity



Conclusively, conscientization, as conceptualized by Paulo Freire, offers a potent lens to understand the dynamics of social movements and collective identity formation. It reminds us that social movements are not merely responses to systemic issues but spaces of learning, reflection, dialogue, and sociopolitical transformation at individual and structural registers. By

fostering conscientization, social movements can empower individuals to challenge oppressive systems and effect meaningful societal change.

Although consciousness-raising in social movement spaces is an understudied phenomenon (Goodwin & Whitten, 2018; Della Porta & Mosca, 2017), structural social movement theorists and new social movement philosophers stress at a theoretical level that it is an imperative component of social movement emergence and sustenance, regardless of scale and target objectives (Fominaya & Cox, 2017). The difficulty in directly measuring internal cognitive shifts associated with critical consciousness, coupled with the prominence of research focusing on more observable factors like resources, political context, and framing, has contributed to the relative understudy of this crucial individual-level process in contemporary social movement research. While valuable, the increasing focus on cultural and emotional aspects may have also inadvertently directed scholarly attention away from the core cognitive and analytical dimensions of developing critical awareness.

While the challenge of studying internal cognitive shifts mirrors broader trends in social movement empiricism, theorists in the field have developed concepts aimed at understanding the phenomena of consciousness-raising within social movement spaces. For example, McAdam's (1982) political process theory, based on his structuralist analysis of the 60's civil rights movement, describes this process of consciousness transformation as "cognitive liberation," referring to the process by which members of an oppressed group develop a collective understanding that incites collective action. Building on this foundation, cognitive liberation represents a pivotal conceptual bridge between structural conditions and collective action. McAdam's formulation of cognitive liberation encompasses three essential dimensions:

participants must 1) perceive the current system as illegitimate and unjust, 2) demand rights and changes to that system, and 3) develop a sense of efficacy about their collective ability to enact change. What distinguishes cognitive liberation from mere awareness or dissatisfaction is its transformative quality. It represents a fundamental shift from fatalism to agency, from accepting conditions as natural or inevitable to recognizing them as socially constructed and therefore changeable. This transformation often occurs through what Eyerman and Jamison (1991) describe as "cognitive praxis," or the collective production of new knowledge and meanings within movement spaces.

The development of cognitive liberation is rarely a purely intellectual process. Rather, it typically emerges through embodied experiences, emotional responses to injustice, and dialogical interactions within communities. As Polletta (2002) demonstrates in her work on storytelling in social movements, narrative practices often play a crucial role in cultivating this liberatory consciousness by connecting personal experiences to structural conditions and collective histories. Despite its theoretical importance, relatively few empirical studies have systematically examined the specific processes, pedagogical approaches, and organizational conditions that foster cognitive liberation in contemporary movements. This represents a significant gap in social movement scholarship that limits our understanding of how critical consciousness translates into sustained collective action.

While McAdam situated cognitive liberation within his broader political process theory, later scholars have expanded our understanding of how this consciousness develops and operates. Gamson (1992) elaborated on this concept through his "collective action frames" that include injustice frames, agency frames, and identity frames, all necessary components for

mobilization. Similarly, Mansbridge and Morris (2001) examined how "oppositional consciousness" develops through the interaction of collective identity formation and recognition of systemic power relations.

Utilizing Goffman's (2010) frame analysis, social movement theorists have also developed various concepts related to how social movements frame issues, sociopolitical arenas, and adversarial institutions to catalyze engagement and garner support (Snow et al., 1986; Benford & Snow, 2000). Beyond being a precursor to collective action, consciousness-raising is recognized as a vital tool for mobilizing participation in social movements, with Klandermans (1992) noting that individuals' awareness and understanding are significantly heightened during episodes of collective action (p. 92). These insights bear striking resemblances to conscientization in how frames "help interpret problems to define problems for action and suggest action pathways to remedy the problem" (McAdam et al., 2008, p. 750). In this regard, the study seeks to take a novel approach to investigate the transformation of cognitive schemas, focusing on how the process unfolds through the lens of critical pedagogy.

Social Movement Consciousness-raising in Academic Literature

Articles incorporated in this literature review were discovered through the University of Georgia (UGA) Library's Multi-Search. The identified research includes current research on consciousness-raising in anti-racist, anti-capitalist social movements of the last 30 years. The corpus can be roughly divided into conceptual and empirical categories, the findings of which will be summarized in this section with examples from the literature. Upon concluding this section, there will be a summary of the literature, an analysis of the unaddressed areas in research, and an explanation of what these mean for the present investigation.

Conceptual Research

Conceptual social movement literature emphasizes the critical role that consciousness-raising plays within anti-racist social movements, confirming many of the assumptions that guide this research endeavor. Consciousness-raising is viewed as a process through which individuals become aware of systemic oppression and the institutional structures that support it, sparking a transformation in their perspectives and attitudes toward racial issues (Summers-Effler, 2002; Smith, 2020). Based on research exploring actual anti-oppressive social movement case studies, these conceptual works discuss consciousness-raising in anti-racist social movement struggles as a process of awakening and enlightenment is often facilitated through open discussions, sharing personal experiences, and educating oneself and others about the historical context and contemporary realities of racism (Adams et al., 2018; Paris, 2020). By promoting such critical awareness, consciousness-raising can inspire collective action against racial injustices, encouraging participants to challenge and change the status quo (Dominelli, 2017; Ward & Mullender, 1991).

Moreover, this literature suggests that consciousness-raising is a mechanism to build solidarity and unity within the movement. As individuals become aware of the pervasiveness and nuances of racism, they can empathize with those who experience it directly and, thus, feel compelled to join the struggle against it (Leggett, 2020; Brysk, 1995; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). For example, Leggett's (2020) work delves into the philosophical underpinnings of consciousness-raising, exploring how it empowers women to recognize and challenge oppressive social structures. Brysk (1995) and Keck and Sikkink (1998) analyze how transnational advocacy networks played a crucial role in disseminating information about human rights abuses, including those related to various forms of oppression, across borders, demonstrating

how information dissemination and framing can function as a form of consciousness-raising on a global scale. Consequently, consciousness-raising educates individuals about racial disparities and fosters a sense of collective identity and purpose across social and gender-constructed bounds (Grover & Kuo, 2023; Alvarez et al., 2008; Wadiwel, 2009). It allows people to connect their personal experiences to broader systemic issues, turning personal grievances into collective action. In this way, consciousness-raising serves as an indispensable tool for mobilizing and sustaining anti-racist social movements.

Empirical Research

Empirical social movement analyses consistently identify consciousness-raising tactics as crucial to building cogent systemic critiques and deploying amassed collective power in social movement spaces. These avenues for upsetting internalized paradigms of capitalistic domination were fecund in the 60's nonviolent Civil Rights Movement (Evans, 1980) and accelerated episodes of collective action and protest that characterized the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Indignados movement in Spain (Bennett, 2012). In an ethnographic analysis of La Via Campesina, an international alliance dedicated to rural food sovereignty in a fight against transnational agribusiness, McCune et al. (2014) unpack how the movement incorporation of Freirean popular education has produced and sustained a global organizational network that has successfully defended food sovereignty in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. They found that participatory learning, shared analysis, and horizontal knowledge share cultivated collective identity within La Via Campesina and empowered collective action. In Australia, the Knitting Nannas Against Gas and Greed (KNAGs) facilitate consciousness-raising groups that foster the analysis of hegemonic social and cultural forces at work inside and outside their movement and

consider how these forces shape Australian politics, gender, race, and class consciousness. Similarly, examining the Indignados movement in Spain, Estrada and Fominaya (2019) emphasize the role of shared emotions and collective experiences in building solidarity, where consciousness-raising practices like assemblies and discussions contribute to the articulation of these emotions, leading to an enriched sense of unity and collective identity among participants.

Comparably, Grover and Kuo (2023) examine how consciousness-raising communicative practices within social movements reshape political understandings of race and influence political communication. They found that consciousness-raising communicative practices within social movements reshape political understandings of race and influence political communication by challenging dominant frames, politicizing personal experiences, and fostering a shared language for articulating racial justice demands (Grover & Kuo, 2023). Likewise, Sabeti (2023) explores the intersection of teacher and artist identities through the practice of teaching artists, an area that has received little scholarly attention. Using portraiture methodology, the study analyzes how Marshallese spoken word artist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner structures workshops to cultivate critical consciousness, highlighting the role of anger in her approach and the complexities of teaching decolonial work within a neo-colonial context. Their adult learning pedagogy grounded in Freirian consciousness-raising philosophy has been effective in recruitment and impact, having grown from one group (called “loops”) to over thirty in 6 years (Larri & Whitehouse, 2019).

The most comprehensive systematic reviews of critical consciousness development to date provide a robust foundation for exploring this construct in social movement spaces. Heberle et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of 67 studies published between 1998 and 2019, finding that critical consciousness consists of three key components: critical reflection

(awareness of systemic inequalities), critical motivation (belief in one's ability to effect change), and critical action (engagement in activities that challenge oppression). Similarly, Pillen et al. (2020) synthesized findings from 20 empirical studies, identifying six qualitative processes in critical consciousness development: priming of critical reflection, information creating disequilibrium, introspection, revising frames of reference, developing agency for change, and acting against oppression. Assante and Momanu (2020), in their qualitative review of 8 studies, emphasized the importance of group discussion and open classroom climate in facilitating critical consciousness, while also highlighting how critical consciousness can replace feelings of isolation with a sense of agency and collective struggle. Similarly, Jemal (2017) identified significant conceptual inconsistencies and theoretical limitations across disciplines. The analysis revealed various competing definitions of critical consciousness, with some scholars conceptualizing it as primarily reflection, others as action, and still others as a combination of both dimensions. Jemal (2017) also highlighted ambiguity regarding whether critical consciousness is a process or outcome and noted that existing frameworks often exclude privileged populations and fail to address intersectionality.

Despite these substantial contributions, significant gaps remain in our understanding of critical consciousness development. Heberle et al. (2020) noted a dearth of research on how critical consciousness manifests across different developmental periods and identity groups, while Pillen et al. (2020) identified limited research on the relationship between critical action and reflection. Furthermore, all three reviews reveal a notable absence of research examining critical consciousness development specifically within social movement contexts, where collective identity formation and political activism might uniquely shape this developmental process.

All in all, research on social movements consistently underscores the importance of consciousness-raising in shaping systemic critiques and harnessing collective power. These practices cultivate critical awareness, equipping activists to challenge dominant narratives and envision transformative change. Examining consciousness-raising within movement spaces enhances our understanding of political communication and the strategies that sustain grassroots activism. Although overlooked, research exploring the conditions that support this cultivation of critical awareness are important in understanding the fundamental principles that underly the development of critical consciousness.

Rationale for the Current Study

Contemporary empirical research has consistently identified critical consciousness-raising as pivotal to the production of collective identity, generative in sustaining social movement engagement and facilitating mobilization. Current studies have focused on describing how critical consciousness is nurtured and supported by explaining traditional customs specific to the movement of study that carried it out as an activity. As a result, these analyses have tended to instrumentalize consciousness-raising. Cognitive transformation processes remain unexplored, and the conversational dynamics of conscientization as a communicative and pedagogical method in social movement spaces remain obscure.

However, critical questions persist regarding the conditions and organizational environments that foster critical consciousness and challenge internalized oppression. These questions concern how anti-racist, anti-oppressive social movement spaces create environments that encourage critical analyses of lived experiences, dismantle harmful dominant discourses, and catalyze collective action for social transformation. Shrikant, Giles, and Angus (2022)

prescribe a slew of challenges for social movement pedagogy studies exploring the contours of social movement processes for collective consolidation and structural participation:

"...which forms of language, argument, and information access from whom, and to whom, are likely to successfully enhance equity, respect, and fairness for marginalized social and racial groups? Which forms of language directed at, and sustaining, minority groups' feelings of a "false consciousness" (that legitimizes hopelessness and insecurity within the groups' psyches..., mental ill-being, and justify an objectively unfair social system for its members and historical attributions of self-or group blame? What forms of protest language and advocacy at rallies and marches for civil rights, and when differentially relayed by various media, can awaken cognitive re-appraisals of unjust and illegitimate forms of subjugation by parties on different sides of the social and racial divide, and with what social and communicative outcomes? (p. 6)

The proposed study seeks to heed this call by exploring how critical consciousness is cultivated and sustained in anti-oppressive social movement spaces where transformative learning environments have historically fostered collective political awakening and mobilization. These identified gaps in critical consciousness theory underscore the need for the present study, which aims to examine how critical consciousness develops in practice among diverse populations engaged in social justice work. By exploring the lived experiences of social movement participants, this research will contribute to a more coherent understanding of how critical consciousness manifests across different identity positions and organizational contexts, ultimately strengthening both theoretical frameworks and practical applications for fostering transformative social change. Furthermore, by investigating these conditions at the intrapersonal

level, this study fills a significant gap in social movement studies research while illuminating the circumstances that facilitate critical consciousness development and collective action for social change.

Summary

This chapter provides the theoretical scaffolding for the study by examining critical race theory, social movement learning, and conscientization. It explores how critical race theory conceptualizes race as a social construction that permeates everyday life and institutions, establishing the foundation for understanding anti-racist movements. The chapter details Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization as a process of developing critical awareness of oppressive conditions through dialogue, reflection, and action. It examines the relationship between conscientization and collective identity formation in social movements, presenting a framework of interrelated components including critical consciousness, reflection, action, dialogue, and social reality. The literature review assesses both conceptual and empirical research on consciousness-raising in social movements, identifying gaps in understanding the interpersonal dynamics and pedagogical processes through which critical consciousness develops in movement spaces. Chapter 3 will outline the research methodology employed to investigate these processes, detailing the systematic thematic analysis framework and explaining how the Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America's Northwest Georgia Branch (ATLDSA NWGA) serves as the research site.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the research methodology for examining the conditions that foster critical consciousness-raising and the dismantling of internalized oppressive beliefs within anti-oppressive social movement organizations. Specifically, this study is guided by two research questions:

1. What conditions within anti-oppressive social movement organizations, such as ATLDSA NWGA, promote the emergence and sustainability of critical consciousness among their members?
2. What conditions within these organizations facilitate the challenge and dismantling of oppressive internalized beliefs?

The chapter discusses the applicability of a qualitative approach using Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis framework in detail, along with the research plan, which includes the methodology, study participants, procedures, analysis methods, and ethical considerations. By addressing these questions, this research seeks to deepen our understanding of the social movement organizational environments that support these transformative processes.

Understanding how anti-oppressive organizations foster critical consciousness can lead to improved internal practices that promote inclusivity, solidarity, and effective collaboration. Insights into how these organizations facilitate transformative social action will assist in

developing strategies to increase member participation and commitment, ensuring that activism is both informed and sustained. Furthermore, by elucidating the processes that lead to critical consciousness, organizations can better empower marginalized communities, encouraging grassroots mobilization and collective action for social justice.

Methodology

A Grounded Qualitative Constructivist Approach

As outlined by Stake (2010), a qualitative study is appropriate when the goal of research is to explain a phenomenon by relying on the perception of a person's experience in a given situation. According to Creswell (2003), a quantitative approach is appropriate when a researcher seeks to understand relationships between variables. Because the purpose of this study was to examine the processes and experiences of members within an anti-racist, anti-oppressive social movement organization, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate choice. This study makes use of a constructivist grounded approach, employing Charmaz's (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory, a methodology that acknowledges the researcher as an active co-creator of meaning rather than a neutral observer, recognizing insights emerge from the researcher's interactions with participants and data rather than being discovered as objective truths. The specific data analysis approach utilized in this study, Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis, provides a structured approach to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data, making it well-suited for examining the complex and dynamic processes of consciousness-raising and political engagement while leveraging a systematic interpretive data analysis process informed by the overall research methodology. This framework allows for a nuanced exploration of how members of ATLDSA NWGA navigate and challenge internalized

oppression, develop critical consciousness, and transition from systemic critique to active participation in social movement organizing. By applying systematic thematic analysis, this study captures the depth and richness of participants' experiences while ensuring a rigorous and transparent analytic process.

Historical and Philosophical Foundations

Thematic analysis has emerged as one of the most influential methodological approaches in qualitative research over the past several decades. Its development can be traced through the pioneering work of scholars such as Boyatzis (1998), who established fundamental techniques for recognizing patterns in qualitative data, and Attride-Stirling (2001), who introduced the concept of thematic networks as an analytic tool. However, it was Braun and Clarke's (2006) seminal paper that provided the first comprehensive framework for conducting thematic analysis, establishing it as a distinct method rather than simply a process within other qualitative approaches.

Thematic analysis is particularly valuable for its theoretical flexibility. The methodology can be applied across a range of theoretical frameworks while maintaining methodological integrity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This flexibility allows researchers to adapt the method to various epistemological positions, from positivist to constructivist paradigms, depending on the nature of the research questions and the researcher's philosophical orientation.

The methodology selected for this study, Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis, represents an evolution of traditional thematic analysis approaches. While building on the foundational work of previous scholars, Naeem et al.'s (2023) framework offers an enhanced

structure that facilitates not only the identification of themes but also the development of conceptual models that can generate new theoretical insights. This systematic approach provides explicit guidance for each stage of analysis, from initial data familiarization to theoretical model development, making it particularly suitable for studies that aim to move beyond description to explanation and theory building.

Constructivist Underpinnings

The constructivist approach to thematic analysis emerges from a rich theoretical landscape that challenges traditional positivist epistemologies, drawing substantively from critical theory and postcolonial scholarship. Grounded in the foundational work of Berger and Luckmann's "The Social Construction of Reality" (1966), this methodological approach fundamentally reconceptualizes knowledge as a dynamic, contextual process rather than an objective discovery. Their seminal work demonstrated how social interactions dialectically produce and reproduce knowledge systems, arguing that seemingly objective social realities are continuously negotiated through complex interpretive practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The theoretical genealogy of this approach extends critically through the Frankfurt School's epistemological critiques, particularly the works of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, who challenged the neutrality of scientific knowledge. Habermas's concept of communicative action further elaborates this perspective, positioning knowledge as fundamentally intersubjective and emerging through dialogic interactions rather than predetermined structures (Habermas, 1985). Frantz Fanon's decolonial scholarship provides a complementary critical lens, explicitly revealing how dominant knowledge systems are embedded in colonial power dynamics. In "Black Skin, White Masks" (1952) and "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961), Fanon

demonstrated how epistemological frameworks are never neutral but deeply implicated in processes of marginalization, socialization, and social control.

This methodological stance thus transcends mere research technique, emerging as a critical epistemic approach that explicitly challenges hegemonic ways of knowing. Drawing on Gergen's (1985) insights into the contextual nature of understanding and Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory, the research framework positions the researcher not as a detached observer, but as an active co-constructor of meaning. The methodology becomes a form of epistemic resistance, echoing Lyotard's postmodern critique of grand narratives and centering the multiplicity of lived experiences (Lyotard, 1984). By explicitly acknowledging the researcher's positionality and the contextual nature of knowledge production, this approach offers a nuanced methodology that honors the complexity of social understanding, transforming research from a process of extraction to one of dialogic meaning-making.

Rationale for Selecting Systematic Thematic Analysis

Naeem et al.'s (2023) six-step systematic thematic analysis process offers a methodological approach that not only addresses the complexity of critical consciousness and social movement research but also provides a rigorous framework for understanding transformative social processes. At its core, the methodology recognizes critical consciousness as a dynamic, socially-constructed phenomenon that emerges through intricate interactions between individual experiences and collective contexts.

The systematic approach distinguishes itself through its nuanced capacity to illuminate complex group processes while maintaining methodological integrity. By emphasizing the

careful selection of keywords (Step 2) and progressive conceptualization (Steps 5-6), the methodology honors participants' subjective experiences while simultaneously developing more abstract theoretical insights. This approach directly addresses the research's fundamental questions about how critical consciousness develops within social movement organization contexts, moving beyond mere description to a deeper understanding of transformative social dynamics.

Critically, the methodology bridges individual and collective dimensions of political consciousness development, recognizing that personal transformation is inextricably linked to broader organizational conditions. Through its approach to theme development (Step 4), the process facilitates a sophisticated analysis that captures both the intimate, personal experiences of participants and the wider systemic contexts that shape these experiences. Unlike traditional descriptive approaches, Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic process aims to generate conceptual models that provide meaningful theoretical insights into how anti-racist, anti-oppressive organizations can effectively foster critical consciousness.

The methodology's strength lies in its delicate balance between systematic rigor and interpretive flexibility. By providing a transparent, structured approach to data analysis, it ensures methodological accountability while simultaneously allowing researchers to engage deeply with the nuanced complexities of participants' experiences. This approach prevents the imposition of predetermined categories, instead allowing the data to reveal its inherent patterns and meanings.

Ultimately, the six-step systematic thematic analysis process represents more than a mere research technique—it is a critical epistemological tool that challenges traditional approaches to

knowledge production. By centering participants' voices, capturing the dynamic nature of political consciousness development, and generating theoretically rich insights, the methodology aligns perfectly with the study's commitment to understanding how social transformation occurs at the intersection of individual experience and collective practice.

The Six-Step Process and Its Application

Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis comprises six distinct yet interconnected steps:

1. **Transcription, familiarization with the data, and selection of quotations:** This initial step involves thorough immersion in the data, transcribing interviews verbatim, and identifying significant quotations that capture key aspects of participants' experiences. Unlike some approaches that select quotations primarily during the writing phase, this methodology incorporates quotation selection as a deliberate early analytical step, focusing attention on especially revelatory or representative passages.
2. **Selection of keywords:** This innovative step distinguishes Naeem et al.'s (2023) approach from other thematic analysis frameworks. It involves identifying significant words or phrases within selected quotations that capture essential concepts related to the research questions. Keywords serve as anchoring points for subsequent analysis, ensuring that coding remains grounded in participants' own language rather than prematurely imposing researcher interpretations.
3. **Coding:** Building on the selected keywords, this step involves developing codes that represent meaningful patterns in the data. The approach employs what Naeem et al. (2023) term the "6Rs for coding" (Robust, Reflective, Resplendent, Relevant, Radical,

Righteous), providing structured guidance for developing codes that comprehensively capture the data's complexity while maintaining theoretical relevance.

4. **Theme development:** This step involves organizing codes into meaningful groups to identify patterns and relationships, thereby offering insights into the research questions. The methodology employs the "4Rs approach" (Reciprocal, Recognizable, Responsive, Resourceful) to ensure themes are coherently connected to codes, clearly aligned with the original data, directly relevant to research questions, and provide valuable interpretive insights.
5. **Conceptualization through interpretation:** This step moves beyond identifying patterns to developing deeper conceptual understanding through interpretation of keywords, codes, and themes. It involves connecting emergent patterns to broader theoretical concepts and existing literature, thus contextualizing the findings within the wider scholarly discourse on critical consciousness development and social movement organizations.
6. **Development of a conceptual model:** The final step involves creating a comprehensive conceptual model that integrates all themes to explain the phenomenon under study. This model serves as a visual and theoretical representation that answers the research questions while highlighting the study's contribution to knowledge about critical consciousness development within anti-oppressive organizations.

This six-step process is particularly well-suited for investigating this study's research questions about the conditions that facilitate critical consciousness development for several reasons. First, the emphasis on selecting keywords and quotations ensures that the analysis remains grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than imposing external frameworks.

Second, the systematic progression from concrete data to abstract conceptualization mirrors the process of critical consciousness development itself, which involves moving from concrete experiences to systemic understanding. Third, the methodology's culmination in a conceptual model aligns with the study's aim to develop theoretical understanding of the organizational conditions that promote critical consciousness, potentially informing practice in other anti-oppressive organizations.

In summary, Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis methodology provides a rigorous yet flexible framework for examining how members of ATLDSA-NWGA develop critical consciousness and dismantle internalized oppressive beliefs. Its constructivist orientation, systematic structure, and emphasis on conceptual model development make it particularly suited for investigating the complex, socially-constructed processes through which individuals within social movement organizations develop the capacity to transition from systemic critique to transformative action.

Methodological Adaptation: Individual Consciousness Pathways (ICP)

While Naeem et al.'s (2023) thematic analysis framework provides a robust method for identifying cross-cutting themes, this study adapted the approach to include Individual Consciousness Pathways (ICPs). Created for the purposes of the study, an ICP is a methodological approach that traces a person's unique developmental journey toward critical consciousness while preserving their narrative coherence and honoring how personal identity factors shape this progression. ICPs represent the diverse personal journeys through which DSA members developed critical consciousness, encompassing their unique catalytic experiences, moments of political awakening, and the specific sequence of events that led to their recognition

of systemic oppression and subsequent engagement in transformative action. This adaptation was made to better capture the uniquely personal journeys of DSA members in developing critical consciousness. The rationale for this adaptation is threefold:

1. **Phenomenological Emphasis:** Given the deeply personal nature of critical consciousness development, highlighting individual pathways honors the phenomenological dimension of this research while maintaining the systematic thematic approach.
2. **Identity Recognition:** The findings reveal that identity integration is crucial to critical consciousness development. The ICP adaptation allows for illustration of how participants' specific identities (racial, cultural, class, gender) shaped their distinct pathways to critical consciousness.
3. **Narrative Coherence:** While cross-cutting themes effectively identify patterns, they can sometimes fragment individual stories. ICPs preserve the narrative coherence of each participant's journey, providing context for understanding how different themes interact within a single life trajectory.

These Individual Consciousness Pathways complement rather than replace the thematic analysis, offering concrete illustrations of how the identified themes manifest in specific life contexts. The ICPs are presented before the thematic findings to provide readers with grounding in participants' lived experiences before exploring the abstracted themes.

The Researcher

Positionality

My positionality as a researcher in this study is deeply intertwined with my personal background, academic training, and lived experiences. Growing up in public housing on the southside of Columbus, Georgia, I was raised by a single mother alongside three siblings in a context shaped by the War on Drugs, inequitable education systems, welfare reform, systemic racism, and the emerging Information Age. Within this environment, my identity and worldview were profoundly influenced by Black radical traditions, civil rights discourse, and the practical solidarity economies that sustained my community.

The walls of homes, barbershops, churches, and community centers in my neighborhood displayed portraits of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Primus King, Thomas Brewer, the Black Panther Party founders, visual representations of resistance that paralleled the survival strategies employed within my community. What academic literature now terms "solidarity economies" and "restorative justice" were lived realities in my neighborhood, where shared resources, community-based conflict resolution, and mutual aid were essential survival mechanisms. These experiences instilled in me a deep appreciation for collective action and community-based solutions to structural inequities.

My educational journey through Oglethorpe University (B.A. in Communications and Rhetoric with a minor in Political Science), the University of Georgia (Master of Social Work), and my current doctoral studies in social work at the University of Georgia has provided theoretical frameworks and empirical tools to analyze and contextualize these early experiences.

Through these academic pursuits, I've developed a critical perspective on neoliberalism, racial capitalism, and the nonprofit-industrial complex while maintaining my commitment to grassroots organizing as a pathway to transformative social change.

As a Black man from a historically marginalized community who has navigated academia and professional social service spaces, I bring a unique vantage point to understanding systems of oppression and resistance. My professional experiences as a community organizer, program development specialist, university instructor, and anti-racist social movement researcher have further refined my theoretical orientation toward critical theory, anti-oppressive practice, and Freirean notions of conscientização (critical consciousness development).

My relationship with ATLDSA began at a moment of personal and collective crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice protests of 2020. Seeking both political community and an outlet for activism, I was drawn to ATLDSA's approach to organizing, which resonated with my admiration for Black Panther Party methodologies that combined direct service, political education, and collective action. My participation in ATLDSA-NWGA, the branch organization of ATLDSA that focuses on local organizing in Cobb and Cherokee County, and its activities from 2020 onward provided me with firsthand experience of how the organization fostered critical consciousness and challenged systemic oppression.

This positionality, as both an insider to the organization and as a scholar with professional and personal stakes in understanding critical consciousness development, inevitably shaped my research questions, methodological choices, analytical approach, and interpretations. My lived experiences with racism, classism, and community resilience inform my sensitivity to how these dynamics manifest within social movement spaces. Simultaneously, my academic

training provides analytical distance and theoretical frameworks that help situate personal and organizational experiences within broader sociopolitical contexts.

I approach this research with a commitment to what bell hooks (1994) calls "engaged pedagogy" (p. 13), or a holistic approach that acknowledges the intellectual, emotional, and embodied aspects of learning and transformation. This orientation aligns with the study's exploration of how ATLDSA members develop critical consciousness through both intellectual understanding and emotional processing of systemic contradictions.

In acknowledging these influences, I do not claim neutrality or objectivity but rather embrace transparency about how my positionality shapes my research while committing to rigorous methodological practices that allow participants' voices and experiences to guide the inquiry. My aim is to produce research that contributes meaningfully to both scholarly understanding and practical approaches to fostering critical consciousness in service of transformative social change.

Reflexive Praxis

In any qualitative investigation, especially one exploring deep social dynamics like critical consciousness development, the researcher's self-awareness becomes a central methodological concern (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). My unique position in this study of the ATLDSA-NWGA as a participant-observer required ongoing examination of my dual identity as both researcher and active participant. This dual positioning demanded rigorous attention to transparency, ethical boundaries, and continuous self-evaluation throughout the research process

or what can be aptly termed "reflexive praxis," acknowledging the inherently dialectical relationship between my scholarly reflection and active organizational involvement.

I first connected with ATLDSA in late 2020 amid the convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice movements following George Floyd's murder, and widespread social upheaval. My involvement with the Northwest Georgia (NWGA) branch included regular participation in organizational meetings, community events, canvassing initiatives, Brakelight Clinics (providing free brake light repairs to reduce police interactions), and political education sessions local to the county I reside in. This immersion afforded me nuanced understanding of internal dynamics, authentic relationships with potential study participants, and provided contextual grounding essential for meaningful inquiry.

The benefits of such immersive positioning were substantial. Unlike external researchers who may require extended time to build trust and understand organizational culture, an **insider research approach** provides immediate access to authentic organizational processes (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). This immersion allows for the observation of critical consciousness development in real time, rather than relying solely on retrospective accounts, which can be influenced by memory distortion or post-hoc rationalization (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Additionally, familiarity with organizational language, shared references, and internal dynamics facilitates deeper and more nuanced interpretations of participants' experiences, reducing the risk of misinterpretation that may arise from an outsider perspective (Hellawell, 2006). Furthermore, participants' awareness of the researcher's commitment to the organization's goals fosters greater openness, leading to more candid discussions about both positive experiences and internal challenges (Chavez, 2008).

When I observed declining participation in ATLDSA-NWGA between 2021 and 2022, my scholarly curiosity intersected with organizational needs. Discussions with branch leadership evolved into a research partnership examining factors affecting member engagement and critical consciousness development. This collaborative approach yielded research questions that emerged organically from both practical organizational challenges and theoretical interests in social movement development.

As the study's investigator, I conducted interviews designed to explore participants' evolving political consciousness while honoring the authenticity of their experiences. Self-awareness remained central to my approach from the initial research design through final analysis. To establish this foundation, I developed a comprehensive positionality statement articulating my background, perspectives, and potential biases (included above).

My role throughout the study required a continuous balance between analysis and participation. This simultaneous engagement as both researcher and member created a productive tension that required vigilant self-monitoring regarding how my organizational relationships and personal experiences might influence interview dynamics, participant candor, and my interpretive processes. Rather than transitioning between distinct investigative phases, I maintained this dual consciousness throughout, participating in organizational activities while simultaneously engaging in analytical reflection about those experiences.

To maintain methodological integrity, I implemented multiple reflective practices. After each interview, I recorded detailed audio reflections capturing immediate impressions, reactions, and emergent insights. These recordings allowed me to process emotional dimensions of participants' stories and document developing analytical connections. Complementing this, I

maintained written reflections in which I critically examined my interpretive assumptions, noted patterns emerging across interviews, and documented methodological decisions. These tactics act as a technique to improve the credibility of this study and helped to address ethical challenges (Hays & Singh, 2011).

Collaborative consultation through member checking proved essential to maintaining analytical rigor (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I engaged in structured dialogue with dissertation committee members who brought expertise in community-based research methods, social movement theory and history, and qualitative inquiry. These consultations focused on methodological alignment, analytical procedures, and the theoretical implications of emerging findings. Committee members' perspectives were particularly valuable in identifying when my insider knowledge might be influencing my interpretations and in suggesting alternative analytical frameworks.

Following preliminary analysis, I shared summary findings with participants, soliciting their feedback regarding whether my interpretations accurately represented their experiences. This verification process added a crucial layer of confirmation while honoring participants' expertise about their own political consciousness development journeys (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

My insider-researcher position offered significant advantages in accessing authentic organizational dynamics but required careful boundary management. To address potential response bias, I began each interview by explicitly acknowledging my organizational involvement while emphasizing that I sought genuine perspectives rather than any particular

narrative. I encouraged participants to share candidly about both affirming and challenging aspects of their DSA experiences.

The resulting analysis represents a collaborative knowledge construction between myself and participants, informed by our shared organizational context while respecting the diversity of consciousness-raising pathways described in the study. This approach aligns with the study's theoretical foundations in critical theory and Freirean pedagogy, which emphasize knowledge as contextually situated and co-created through dialogical engagement.

Procedure

Organizational Research Partner: The Northwest Georgia Branch of the Democratic Socialists of America Atlanta Chapter

Background

The organization I worked with, namely ATLDSA and its branch organization, the NWGA Branch, located in the metro area of Atlanta, Georgia. Home to a vibrant and diverse activist network that has long served as an epicenter for grassroots social justice organizing, the city provides a variety of benefits in the pursuit of investigating social movements.

First, Atlanta has a rich history of social movements, with many moments of significant grassroots mobilization in the city over the years and decades of Black radical insurgency. One of the most notable social movements in Atlanta was the Civil Rights Movement, which played a pivotal role in the fight for racial equality in the United States. The movement was led by prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., who was born and raised in Atlanta (Laurent, 2019). In addition to the Civil Rights Movement, Atlanta has been the site of other social movements, including the Occupy Atlanta movement in 2011, which protested economic

inequality and corporate greed. The city has also been a hub for LGBTQ+ activism, with the Atlanta Pride Festival being one of the most prominent LGBTQ+ events in the Southeastern United States. Overall, Atlanta has a rich and diverse history of social movements that have played a significant role in shaping the city and the country as a whole. It is the optimal site of choice for a social movement study.

Second, Atlanta has played host to decades of social movement research studies, seen as an exemplary case study of how certain geographical areas readily lend themselves to the acceleration of social movement organizing. Being a city home to a fierce cornucopia of intersectional justice groups organized around intersecting identities, the site chosen for this study provides an evidence-based environment that caters to researching social movements (Larson & Lizardo, 2019; Peretz, 2020), on and offline (Lee & Jang, 2021; Fan et al., 2021). Relevant to the interests of this study, a wide assortment of studies in Atlanta have been conducted to examine social movement dynamics in chapters of the Movement for Black Lives (destine, 2023; Chowkwanyun, 2023; Milligan et al., 2021).

Third, choosing a site I am accustomed to as a citizen has documented benefits to the research agenda outlined in this study. According to Padgett (2017), it is easier to develop rapport with research participants in sites where the researcher has the most experience navigating: “With the familiar, the path to acceptance and cooperation is usually smoother, and comfort levels are higher (p. 51). In addition, conducting research in a familiar environment accelerates the process with a baseline familiarity with the phenomena of study, including where the dynamic takes place (Padgett, 2017).

Researching social movement phenomena specific to the unique context of Atlanta, Georgia, requires the acquisition of specific conceptual competencies and familiarity with

practiced norms unique to membership in this specific activist community and within its particular intersections to recognize both the objects of study, the ways they are produced or facilitated, and the dynamics involved in their production, of which I have accomplished being a member and partner of Atlanta social movement organizations for half a decade. I have a baseline mastery of the “natural language” inherent in the research context to comprehend the sociological relations taking place (ten Have, 2005, p. 44).

However, I also recognize the need to combat the unproductive excesses of familiarity inherent in these spaces I have regularly navigated. As ethnomethodological researchers have contended with in the past, allowing familiarity unbridled sanction in a research endeavor, particularly as it relates to the collection and analysis of relevant data, can risk glossing over insights that I may see as “ordinary” and, on the other side of the coin, fixate on things “conventionally ‘there’ to be seen (Morris, 2016, quoting Becker, 1971). Morris (2016) offers a valuable passage from Hammersley and Atkinson’s (2007) landmark work that guides how I will balance my unique positionality:

“The comfortable sense of being ‘at home’ is a danger signal...there must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual ‘distance.’ For it is in this space created by this distance that the analytic work of the ethnographer gets done” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 90).

To ensure the rigor of my research, the robustness of my data analysis, and the credibility of my findings, I pursued a form of “participant-observer” positionality, where I will strive to balance my affiliations as a member of these organizations, my attachment to the broad Black cultural group, and my place-based investments to Atlanta while conducting this research.

Collaborative Research Approach

The findings of this study have significant implications for its partner organization, ATLDSA NWGA, providing both the rationale for its execution and the shared justification for its implementation. Recent data indicate that ATLDSA as a whole, and the NWGA branch specifically, has experienced a sharp decline in membership since 2021 (Withers, 2024).

For context, between 2015 and 2021, National DSA membership grew by 1,500%, driven in part by the organization's ability to mobilize around Donald Trump's presidential victory, DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's unexpected electoral win, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Krieg, 2018; Kurtzleben & Malone, 2018). Membership climaxed at 95,000 in 2021 before falling to 77,575 by 2023 (Johnston, 2022). The most recent figures, as of October 2024, report 50,713 active DSA members nationwide (Sernatinger, 2025). ATLDSA has not been exempt from this decline, reinforcing the need to examine effective strategies for membership recruitment and retention. After discussions about the study's alignment with ATLDSA-NWGA leadership's objectives, it received full support from both leadership and membership. This study specifically examines the experiences of members of the Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America's Northwest Georgia Branch (ATLDSA NWGA).

Historical Background: Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)

Established in 2006, the Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is among approximately 200 DSA local chapters and organizing committees. As advocates of democratic socialism, their vision is a society where resources are controlled by democratic means to fulfill human needs instead of generating profits for a minority. To achieve this aim, it engages in community and neighborhood organizations, educate the populace about socialism, and advocate

for transformative reforms that transfer power to the working class. Atlanta DSA operates purely on a volunteer basis, driven by its members, and funded by their dues payments. Decisions within the organization are made democratically during their monthly membership gatherings, which are open to all. In between these meetings, members collaboratively engage in various committees and campaigns focusing on political action, labor organization, and educational initiatives (Atlanta DSA, n.d.).

The story of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) emerged from a complex political landscape that reflected the profound transformations of late 20th-century American radical politics. Its roots can be traced to two distinct but complementary organizations that arose in the early 1970s: the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) and the New American Movement (NAM), each representing different approaches to socialist organizing.

DSOC, founded in 1973, emerged from a defeated anti-Vietnam War wing of the Socialist Party. Unlike traditional left organizations, it quickly distinguished itself by building significant networks among trade union activists, left-leaning Democratic Party members, and a growing campus-based youth movement. The organization was characterized by its pragmatic approach to political change, seeking to work within existing political structures while challenging their fundamental limitations (Atlanta DSA, n.d.).

In contrast, the New American Movement, established in 1971, drew its lineage from Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and socialist-feminist women's unions. NAM focused on grassroots organizing, concentrating on local struggles around affordable housing, reproductive rights, and utility rate reform. The movement was particularly notable for its innovative approach to understanding the intersections of race, gender, and class, helping to reshape left-wing political thinking (Atlanta DSA, n.d.).

Michael Harrington emerged as the pivotal figure who would ultimately bridge these different socialist traditions. By the early 1980s, he orchestrated a groundbreaking merger that was remarkable in American radical politics - one of the few organizational formations born from unity rather than division. The merger brought together approximately 6,000 members, combining DSOC's political connections with NAM's grassroots energy and commitment to intersectional organizing (Atlanta DSA, n.d.).

This merger was a substantial undertaking undergirded by ideological and organizational compromise. It represented a deliberate attempt to create a distinctly American socialist movement that could work within democratic institutions while challenging their fundamental limitations. The founding leaders had to navigate significant ideological differences, particularly around approaches to anti-communism and international politics (Atlanta DSA, n.d.). NAM's New Left veterans, shaped by anti-Vietnam War politics, approached anti-communism differently from DSOC's leadership, who had been formed in anti-Stalinist struggles.

The intellectual foundations of this movement stretched back to earlier radical traditions. W.E.B. Du Bois, an intellectual who was himself a member of the Communist Party, had long argued that true liberation was fundamentally about labor and the global working class. His declaration that "the emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor, and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown, and black" (Du Bois, 1935, p. 16) became a philosophical cornerstone for future socialist organizing.

Martin Luther King Jr., particularly in his later years, articulated a vision of economic justice that resonated deeply with socialist principles. His Poor People's Campaign sought to unite working-class people across racial lines, a strategy that would later become central to DSA's organizing approach ("About," n.d.). The Black Panther Party's community service

programs - providing free breakfast, health clinics, and education - represented practical implementations of socialist community care that DSA would eventually embrace (Newton Foundation, 2008).

Contemporary Black radical intellectuals like Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Barbara Smith, and Robin D.G. Kelley became instrumental in shaping the general public's concept of socialist politics through the lens of the Black struggle, to include DSA's understanding of intersectionality and revolutionary politics (Taylor, 2017; Taylor, 2018). These scholars consistently argued that meaningful social transformation requires understanding how race, class, and gender intersect, a perspective that has become central to the organization's philosophy.

For its first few decades, DSA remained a small but intellectually vibrant organization. Focusing on labor solidarity, anti-racism work, and feminist organizing, the group developed critical perspectives on capitalism that challenged mainstream political discourse (Atlanta DSA, n.d.). The organization worked to build coalitions among progressive trade unionists, civil rights activists, feminists, and left-leaning political activists, a vision that seemed utopian to the average U.S. citizen in the 1970s but gradually gained traction through initiatives like the Democratic Agenda project (Atlanta DSA," n.d.).

The 1980s proved challenging, with the rise of Reagan and Thatcher representing a significant rightward shift in global politics. Yet DSA continued to argue for democratic industrial policy and social justice, maintaining its commitment to transformative politics even during conservative times. The Youth Section played a significant role in anti-apartheid and anti-intervention movements, linking struggles for social justice abroad with struggles at home (Atlanta DSA, n.d.).

The organization's transformative moment came unexpectedly with Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign. Sanders brought socialist ideas into mainstream political discourse in a way no national figure had done in generations. The impact was dramatic. DSA's membership exploded from around 6,000 to over 55,000 in just three years. By 2022, the organization had grown to approximately 92,000 members, predominantly young and drawn from graduate students, young professionals, and academic workers (Atlanta DSA, n.d.).

The organization's journey reflects broader shifts in American political consciousness. A generation that has grown up with economic precarity, climate crisis, and systemic inequalities is discovering that old political solutions no longer work. DSA offers something different - not just a critique of the current system, but a vision of what might be possible when people come together with imagination, solidarity, and hope.

The impact of DSA extended far beyond traditional metrics of political success. While electoral victories remained limited, the organization had fundamentally changed political conversations. The election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to Congress symbolized this shift, but more profound changes were happening in local communities (Goldmacher, 2018). Mutual aid networks developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, labor solidarity campaigns, and grassroots political education initiatives demonstrated a new approach to political organizing (Daphi et al., 2024).

Sampling

The sample was drawn from members of the ATLDSA NWGA, an anti-oppressive social movement organization in Atlanta, Georgia through a purposive sampling methodology. Drawing from Hays and Singh's (2011) research methodology, the approach combined purposive

sampling with elements of snowball sampling. This strategy allowed for purposefully selecting individuals who met the specific criteria while also leveraging participant networks to identify additional potential participants.

Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older and currently active in the organization, a condition of their membership. All participants needed to have been involved with the organization for at least six months to ensure they had sufficient experience with the organization's consciousness-raising practices and activities. All participants had to be fluent in English, though English did not need to be their native language.

Participants were recruited through the organization's email listserv and group messaging chats. Initially, recruitment was planned through the DSA's Steering Committee. However, due to organizational changes and operational security concerns amid a shifting sociopolitical landscape and the increasing suppression of social movement actors on college campuses, the approach shifted to working directly with the Northwest Georgia Branch leadership, who facilitated access to interested members. This modification was documented in a progress report submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher anticipated approximately 10-15 participants for this study. The final number of participants was 10, as determined by saturation (Hennik & Kaiser, 2022), the point at which no new themes or patterns emerged from the data collection process.

Recruitment and Participant Engagement

The research study received formal approval from the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in preparation for data collection during the Summer of 2024.

Throughout the course of recruitment, ATLDSA NWGA collaborated closely to support the research, which employed a purposive sampling methodology through ATLDSA NWGA communication channels to solicit potential participants. As interested individuals reached out directly, they were provided with a link to a Qualtrics intake survey and a comprehensive informed consent letter. This document provided participants with essential information about the research study, offering a clear overview of the purpose, objectives, and procedures. Participants received detailed insights into their potential roles, expected time commitments, and the specific tasks involved in the research.

The informed consent form was crafted to explicitly outline the voluntary nature of participation, emphasizing participants' right to withdraw at any time without facing any negative consequences. Confidentiality and privacy measures were transparently communicated, detailing the intricate process of how participant information would be handled, stored, and anonymized. The document also candidly disclosed potential risks and benefits associated with participation, providing researchers' contact information to address any questions or concerns.

The study's research design unfolded across multiple carefully planned engagement phases. As mentioned previously, participants began by completing a Qualtrics survey that collected basic demographic information and data related to their participation in the social movement organization. Following the survey, participants were seamlessly directed to a Calendly link, allowing them to schedule convenient interview times that suited their individual schedules. Throughout the study, participants were consistently reassured of their autonomy, with researchers emphasizing the right to withdraw without consequences.

Data Collection

This study utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher to gather rich, narrative data from participants. Memo writing occurred regularly throughout the study to capture research thoughts during and after each interview. Interviews were conducted and recorded electronically during the summer of 2024 using a conference recording service and transcribed for analysis. Interviews were conducted and interviews were recorded via Zoom video conference. The interview recordings were subsequently transcribed via Otter.ai software. Both the researcher and the participant were in separate, private locations. As part of the interview introduction, the researcher confirmed that the participant was in a private setting where conversations could not be overheard.

Three-Round Interview Structure

Data collection followed a three-round interview process guided by a semi-structured interview framework, with the option to combine all rounds into a single, sequential, in-depth interview lasting 1 hour and 15 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. This interview approach offers a general framework while giving participants the freedom to guide the conversation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It also enables the researcher to seek explanation and deeper insights through additional lines of questioning contextually relevant to each interview. The flexible structure of semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. Each round built upon the previous one, facilitating a progressive exploration of participants' experiences with critical consciousness development and engagement in social activism.

The interview protocol was designed to trace participants' journeys of political and social awareness within ATLDSA NWGA. It began by exploring their prior beliefs and perspectives on social issues before joining the organization. From there, the interviews examined their experiences of transformative learning and consciousness-raising within ATLDSA NWGA, focusing on the key moments that shaped their understanding. The discussion then shifted to the organizational conditions that either supported or hindered their development of critical consciousness. As participants reflected on these influences, they described how their understanding of systemic oppression and personal agency evolved over time. Finally, the interviews explored how this newfound consciousness translated into social action, highlighting the ways participants applied their insights to engage in collective transformation.

Theoretical Foundations of the Interview Design

The interview guide for this study was deliberately designed across three rounds to reflect key theoretical and empirical insights from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). These foundational critical theorists inform not only the content of the questions but also the structure and progression of the interview process itself.

Freirean Dialogic Approach and Conscientization

Freire's concept of conscientization, the process by which individuals develop critical awareness of social conditions through dialogue and reflection, forms a central pillar of the interview design. Each round of interviews builds upon this process in specific ways:

Round 1: Exploring Personal Context and Initial Consciousness

The first interview round focuses on participants' upbringing, socialization, and formative experiences, reflecting Freire's emphasis on understanding the situated nature of knowledge and the importance of biographical context in conscientization. Questions about family influence on values, early memories of social norms, and pivotal life experiences establish how participants' worldviews were initially formed. The progression to questions about political identity development mirrors Freire's understanding that critical consciousness begins with recognizing how one's personal experiences connect to broader sociopolitical structures.

For example, the question "Can you describe your political identity and how you came to develop it?" invites participants to engage in what Freire termed "reading the world" (Freire, 2000, p. 35) by connecting personal experience to broader social structures. Similarly, questions about motivations for social justice work and social movement participation reflect Freire's emphasis on praxis, the integration of reflection and action.

Round 2: Dialectical Engagement with Movement Praxis

The second round examines participants' involvement in the social movement, moments of doubt, and strategies for maintaining focus. This phase embodies Freire's concept of dialogic education as participants reflect on their experiences within the movement. Questions about the role of dialogue in their work (Question 3) directly engage with Freire's emphasis on dialogue as a tool for liberation and consciousness-raising. The exploration of tensions and moments of doubt (Questions 4-6) reflects Freire's understanding that conscientization is not a linear process but involves contradictions and struggle. The questions about maintaining focus amid shifting

priorities (Questions 7-9) connect to Freire's concept of "limit situations, (Freire, 2000, p. 47-48)" or challenges that can either obstruct transformation or serve as opportunities for deeper consciousness when critically engaged.

Round 3: Transformative Action and Collective Praxis

The final round focuses on how participants translate consciousness into action by spreading the movement's message and evaluating success and failure. This aligns with Freire's emphasis on praxis as the ultimate goal of conscientization. Questions about strategies for engagement (Questions 1-5) reflect the Freirean principle that liberation requires not just awareness but strategic action to transform oppressive conditions. The investigation of how participants learn from both success and failure (Questions 6-10) embodies Freire's concept of critical reflection as an ongoing component of transformative action. The concluding questions about lessons learned and insights gained (Questions 11-13) reflect Freire's understanding of education as a continuous process of action and reflection.

Fanonian Analysis of Internalized Oppression

To explore the psychological dimensions of critical consciousness development and how participants navigate internalized oppression, the interview protocol incorporated questions that engage with Fanonian concepts of psychopolitical liberation. Fanon's work on internalized oppression and the psychological impacts of colonization and racism influenced the interview design in the following ways:

Round 1: Excavating Socialized Consciousness

The first round's emphasis on early socialization and identity formation reflects Fanon's analysis of how dominant ideologies become internalized through social processes. Questions about family influence, learning about social norms, and pivotal experiences align with Fanon's exploration of how racial and class consciousness develops in oppressive contexts.

The questions about political identity development provide space for participants to articulate how they navigated and potentially challenged dominant ideological frameworks, reflecting Fanon's concern with the psychological journey toward authentic liberation from internalized oppression.

Round 2: Confronting and Dismantling Internalization

The second round's focus on moments of doubt and tension within movement spaces connects to Fanon's analysis of the psychological struggles involved in confronting internalized beliefs. Questions about circumstances that made participants question their involvement (Questions 4-5) create space to explore what Fanon might describe as moments of contradiction between emerging critical consciousness and residual internalized oppression. The exploration of how participants sustained their commitment (Question 6) relates to Fanon's understanding that liberation requires not only intellectual recognition of oppression but also emotional and psychological transformation through collective action.

Round 3: Counter-Hegemonic Action and New Consciousness

The final round's focus on spreading the movement's message and challenging dominant narratives aligns with Fanon's emphasis on developing counter-hegemonic discourse and action as essential to liberation. Questions about strategies for engaging others (Questions 1-3) connect to Fanon's understanding that dismantling systemic oppression requires not only personal transformation but also collective action to change social consciousness. The investigation of success, failure, and impact assessment (Questions 4-10) reflects Fanon's concern with developing authentic metrics for liberation rather than those imposed by oppressive systems. The concluding questions about insights and lessons learned (Questions 11-13) create space for participants to articulate emergent liberatory consciousness that transcends internalized oppression.

Table 2

Theoretical Foundations of Interview Design

Interview Round	Freirean Concepts	Fanonian Concepts	Example Questions
Round 1: Exploring Personal Context and Initial Consciousness	Conscientization beginnings; "Reading the world" (p. 35); Situated knowledge; Biographical context	Internalized oppression; Formation of racial/class consciousness; Social processes of ideological internalization	"Can you describe your political identity and how you came to develop it?" How did your family influence your values and beliefs?"
Round 2: Dialectical Engagement with Movement Praxis	Dialogic education; Non-linear consciousness development; "Limit situations" (p. 47-48) as challenges and opportunities, Reflection process	Psychological struggles in confronting internalized beliefs; Contradictions between emerging consciousness and internalized oppression;	"What role does dialogue play in your work?" "Were there times you questioned your

		Emotional/psychological transformation through collective action	involvement? What circumstances led to this?"
			How have you sustained your commitment?"
Round 3: Transformative Action and Collective Praxis	Praxis (integration of reflection and action); Strategic action to transform conditions; Critical reflection as ongoing	Counter-hegemonic discourse and action; Collective strategies for changing social consciousness; Authentic metrics for liberation; Emergent liberatory consciousness	"What strategies do you use to engage others in the movement?" How do you assess impact and success?" "What lessons have you learned that you would share with others?"

Data Analysis

Data Analysis Process

The data analysis process for this study followed a rigorous systematic thematic analysis approach based on Naeem et al.'s (2023) six-step framework for qualitative research. This methodical process enabled the development of a conceptual model that captured the conditions promoting critical consciousness development within anti-oppressive social movement organizations, particularly within the Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America Northwest Georgia Branch (ATLDSA NWGA).

The Six-Step Process of Systematic Thematic Analysis

Step 1: Transcription, Familiarization with the Data, and Selection of Quotations.

The initial stage of analysis involved immersion in the data collected from interviews with ATLDSA NWGA members. After conducting and recording the interviews via Zoom, I transcribed them using Otter.ai transcription software. I then manually reviewed each transcript against the original audio recordings to ensure accuracy and to correct any transcription errors. During the familiarization process, I created analytic memos in a dedicated research journal, documenting my initial impressions, potential patterns, and emerging questions. These memos captured my immediate reactions to participants' stories, particularly focusing on moments where participants described transformative experiences or shifts in political consciousness. Additionally, I engaged in deep reading of each transcript at least three times: first for general understanding, second for identifying significant passages, and third for selecting meaningful quotations. This iterative process of reading and memoing helped me develop sensitivity to the nuances in participants' accounts of their political development.

For quotation selection, I hand-coded the transcripts using colored highlighting in Microsoft Word, with different colors representing different aspects of critical consciousness development (e.g., yellow for pivotal early life experiences, blue for organizational contexts, green for identity-related insights). I selected approximately 15-20 key quotations per participant that vividly illustrated their journeys, challenges, and transformative moments. Following Naeem et al.'s (2023) approach, I prioritized quotations that demonstrated "realness" by authentically capturing lived experiences, showed "richness" through detailed descriptions, and exhibited "resonance" by connecting to broader patterns across participants.

Step 2: Selection of Keywords.

Building on the selected quotations, I created a separate Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to systematically identify and organize significant keywords. The spreadsheet contained columns for the original quotation, extracted keywords, and notes about why these keywords were significant. I applied Naeem et al.'s (2023) "6Rs" framework for keyword selection:

- **Realness:** I identified words that reflected genuine experiences and perceptions of participants. For example, when a participant described feeling "alienated" in their conservative community before finding DSA, this keyword captured their authentic emotional experience.
- **Richness:** I selected words providing detailed understanding of critical consciousness development. Keywords like "awakening," "connecting dots," and "seeing patterns" offered rich descriptions of participants' cognitive processes.
- **Repetition:** I utilized Excel's search function to identify words appearing frequently across multiple participants, tracking their occurrence in a dedicated frequency column. Words like "community," "solidarity," and "organizing" appeared consistently across interviews.
- **Rationale:** I highlighted words connected to the theoretical foundation of critical consciousness, such as "systemic," "critique," and "praxis," which aligned with Freire's (2000) conceptualization of conscientization.
- **Repartee:** I noted particularly insightful or evocative words that stimulated further consideration. For instance, one participant's description of feeling like "the scales fell from my eyes" provided a powerful metaphor for sudden political clarity.

- Regal: I identified words central to understanding critical consciousness development, such as "identity," "power," and "resistance," which served as cornerstones for subsequent analysis.

After completing this process for all transcripts, I consolidated similar keywords and created a master list of approximately 120 significant keywords that would form the foundation for the coding process.

Step 3: Coding.

For the coding phase, I utilized a hybrid approach combining manual and digital methods. Initially, I created a three-column system in Microsoft Word with the original text, selected keywords, and assigned codes. This allowed me to maintain clear connections between participants' language and my analytical interpretations. Following Naeem et al.'s (2023) "6Rs for coding" approach, I developed codes that were:

- Robust: I ensured codes captured multiple aspects of critical consciousness development. For example, the code "disruptive life events" encompassed various types of triggering events that participants described, including personal encounters with inequality, exposure to alternative narratives, and moments of political disillusionment.
- Reflective: I deliberately crafted codes that connected participants' experiences with theoretical concepts. For instance, the code "counter-narrative exposure" reflected both participants' concrete descriptions of ATLDSA NWGA meetings and Freire's theoretical concept of dialogue as essential to conscientization.

- Resplendent: I developed codes that provided comprehensive explanations of the context under study. For example, the code "Dialectical Growth" captured how participants described their evolving understanding of systemic oppression through ongoing cycles of contradiction, reflection, and new synthesis. This code richly conveyed the dynamic and non-linear nature of critical consciousness development, incorporating participants' descriptions of moving back and forth between moments of clarity and confusion before achieving deeper understanding.
- Relevant: I verified that each code directly addressed the research questions about conditions promoting critical consciousness and processes for challenging internalized beliefs.
- Radical: I included codes that offered unique insights, sometimes challenging mainstream narratives. For example, the code "Identity as Analytical Tool" challenged class-reductionist approaches that minimize the importance of identity in political analysis.
- Righteous: I ensured codes fit logically within the broader coding framework and maintained consistency across the analysis.

I engaged in two coding cycles: the first to establish preliminary codes based directly on keywords, and the second to refine and consolidate these codes into a more coherent analytical framework. This iterative process yielded 24 distinct codes that captured various aspects of critical consciousness development within ATLDSA NWGA. While the diagrammatic representation of the systematic thematic analysis process (adapted from Naeem et al.'s (2023) model) presents a simplified illustration with representative codes, the full analysis incorporated all 24 codes organized by their relationship to the emerging themes.

Step 4: Theme Development.

To develop themes from the established codes, I created visual representations of potential relationships between codes. This visual mapping helped identify natural groupings and connections that might not have been immediately apparent in text-based analysis. Following Naeem et al.'s (2023) "4Rs approach" to theme development, I ensured themes were:

- **Reciprocal:** I identified mutual connections between different codes using matrix coding, which allowed me to see which codes frequently co-occurred. For example, the codes "Relational Dialogue" and "Identity Validation" frequently appeared together, suggesting a reciprocal relationship that informed the theme "Relational Organizing as Critical Pedagogy."
- **Recognizable:** I verified that emerging themes were clearly aligned with and identifiable from the original data by reviewing representative quotations for each potential theme. This process ensured themes authentically represented participants' experiences rather than imposing external frameworks.
- **Responsive:** I evaluated each potential theme against the research questions, ensuring they directly addressed the study's aims and objectives regarding critical consciousness development and the challenging of internalized beliefs.
- **Resourceful:** I assessed potential themes for their ability to provide useful insights to answer the research questions, prioritizing those that offered substantive explanations of the phenomena under study.

I also employed analytical memos during this stage, writing detailed reflections on emerging themes and their interconnections. These memos served as both an audit trail of my analytical decisions and a space for developing more abstract interpretations of the data.

Through this process, seven key themes emerged from the 24 codes. While initial code co-occurrence patterns suggested certain groupings, the final thematic structure evolved through deeper analysis. For example, although "Relational Dialogue" and "Identity Validation" frequently co-occurred, further analysis revealed that these codes connected to distinct theoretical constructs. "Identity Validation" had stronger connections to other identity-focused codes, ultimately contributing to the "Identity-Integrated Analysis" theme, while "Relational Dialogue" aligned more with codes related to supportive organizational environments, informing the "Supportive Environments" theme. This analytical refinement ensured that the final thematic structure represented the most coherent and theoretically meaningful organization of the data. I created a thematic map to visualize these relationships, with the seven primary themes connected to their constituent codes. This visual representation helped ensure logical coherence in the thematic structure and facilitated the identification of overarching patterns.

Step 5: Conceptualization Through Interpretation of Keywords, Codes, and Themes.

The conceptualization phase involved deepening the analysis through theoretical interpretation of the identified themes. I created a dedicated interpretative framework document in Microsoft Word with columns for themes, theoretical concepts, literature connections, and interpretative insights.

For each theme, I engaged in the following process:

1. Definition development: I crafted clear, precise definitions for each theme based on the constituent codes and supporting data.
2. Theoretical connection: I identified relevant theoretical frameworks from the literature on critical consciousness, social movements, and anti-oppressive practice that could illuminate each theme.
3. Comparative analysis: I compared findings across participants, noting similarities and differences in how themes manifested across diverse identities and experiences.
4. Visual mapping: I created conceptual diagrams to visualize relationships between themes, looking for hierarchical, sequential, or dialectical connections.

For example, I interpreted the theme "Catalytic Experiences for Critical Consciousness" through Paulo Freire's (2000) concept of "conscientização" and bell hooks' (1994) notion of "confrontational moments." This theoretical framing helped illuminate how specific experiences create cognitive dissonance that initiates critical consciousness development. I evaluated the quality of conceptual definitions using Naeem et al.'s (2023) criteria, asking:

- Does the definition clarify the meaning of the theme?
- Does it help understand the research results?
- Is it accurate and reliable?
- Does it reflect the real context of the research?
- How does it apply to different levels of analysis?
- How does it contribute to theory and practice?
- Does it relate logically to other concepts?

These questions guided the refinement of conceptual definitions until they effectively captured the essence of each theme while connecting to broader theoretical frameworks.

Transition from Individual Consciousness Pathways to Thematic Analysis.

A key methodological innovation in this study was the development of Individual Consciousness Pathways (ICPs) as a complement to the systematic thematic analysis. The transition from constructing ICPs to developing cross-cutting themes required careful analytical bridging. After completing the systematic thematic analysis, I returned to each participant's data to construct a narrative account of their unique journey toward critical consciousness. These ICPs were developed by:

1. Chronologically ordering key events and experiences described by each participant
2. Identifying pivotal moments of political transformation
3. Mapping the specific catalysts, supports, challenges, and actions that characterized their journey
4. Creating a narrative table summarizing their pathway with illustrative quotations

Once the ICPs were constructed for all ten participants, I conducted a comparative analysis to identify both shared patterns and unique features across these pathways. This comparative analysis served as a bridge between the idiographic focus on individual journeys (focusing on the uniqueness of individual experiences) and the nomothetic focus on common themes (focusing on discovering general laws that apply across cases).

The findings from both analyses were then integrated, with the ICPs providing concrete, contextualized examples of how the themes manifested in individual lives, while the systematic

thematic analysis offered a more abstract, theoretical understanding of the conditions promoting critical consciousness development across participants.

Step 6: Development of Conceptual Model.

For the final step, I integrated the interpretative work into a comprehensive conceptual model explaining critical consciousness development within anti-oppressive social movement organizations. I began by sketching potential model structures on paper, experimenting with different ways to represent the relationships between themes. After exploring several configurations, I utilized Lucidchart diagramming software to create a more refined visual representation. The model illustrated the dynamic process of critical consciousness development through four interconnected components:

1. Catalytic Foundations: Experiences creating cognitive dissonance between lived experiences and dominant narratives
2. Supportive Environments: Spaces where contradictions can be processed collectively
3. Identity-Integrated Analysis: Integration of identity-based understanding with systemic critique
4. Praxis Pathways: Channels for translating critical consciousness into concrete action

I repeatedly tested this model against the original data, verifying that it accurately represented participants' experiences while providing a useful theoretical framework for understanding critical consciousness development. This validation process involved returning to representative quotations for each component of the model and confirming that they aligned with the model's conceptualization. I also consulted my analytic memos throughout this process,

ensuring that insights developed during earlier stages of analysis were incorporated into the final model. The conceptual model was refined through multiple iterations, with adjustments made to better reflect the complexity and dynamism of critical consciousness development as described by participants.

Data Protection and Participant Anonymity

To protect participant identity, the study implemented an innovative de-identified participant code system. Per instructions in the online intake survey, participants crafted a personalized code using their first name initial, favorite color, number of pets at home, and last name initial. This approach ensured individual data tracking while maintaining complete anonymity, transforming potentially identifying information into a secure, randomized identifier.

Data protection remained paramount throughout the research process. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored on password-protected devices and cloud storage platforms, with access strictly restricted to the primary researcher. All data was meticulously anonymized to protect participant identity, and email records were scheduled for destruction after data collection.

Member Checking and Participant Engagement

The researcher's commitment extended beyond data collection. A cornerstone of the study's methodological approach was the implementation of rigorous member checking. Drawing from Marshall and Rossman's (2016) research on qualitative methodology, the study prioritized

participant validation and engagement. After conducting semi-structured interviews, the researcher developed a detailed data report titled "Unveiling Voices of Transformation: Experiences of NWGA Branch DSA Members: Joining & Remaining Active."

This document was distributed to all interview participants, outlining five preliminary key thematic findings:

1. Catalytic Experiences Drive Political Development
2. Navigating Diverse Information Environments
3. Identity-Centered Political Development
4. Relational Organizing as Foundation for Sustained Engagement
5. Practice-Value Alignment Affects Membership Retention

After analysis, final reports summarizing the study's findings were shared with participants. Debriefing sessions followed each research interview, creating space for reflection and additional insights. Recognizing the potential emotional impact of research participation, the study investigator provided participants with a list of recommended support organizations and offered optional follow-up interviews to explore specific themes in greater depth. After dissemination of the reports, all study participants affirmed that the themes appropriately reflected their experiences joining and remaining active in the ATLDSA NWGA Branch.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was established through several strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research. To establish credibility, this study ensured that all participants had relevant experience in critical consciousness development within

ATLDSA NWGA. Member checking was employed by sharing preliminary infographic data reports with participants to verify the accuracy of findings, while data triangulation was achieved by analyzing insights from multiple interviews.

Transferability was addressed by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the organizational conditions and consciousness-raising processes. This level of detail allows readers to assess whether the study's findings are applicable to similar organizational settings. To ensure dependability, consistent procedures were followed across all interviews, and all research decisions and analytical steps were carefully documented. This approach maintained methodological rigor and allowed for the study's replication.

Finally, confirmability was strengthened by minimizing researcher bias through memo writing, constant comparative analysis, and reflexive practices. These strategies helped separate researcher interpretations from participants' expressed experiences, ensuring that findings accurately represented the participants' perspectives. Additionally, the use of Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis process enhanced trustworthiness by providing a structured framework that guided each step of data collection and analysis, ensuring that findings remained grounded in participants' experiences while facilitating theoretical development about critical consciousness and social transformation.

Ethical Concerns

The study's investigator ensured ethics remained a top priority throughout the study. Following the methods as outlined in this chapter was paramount in ensuring the validity and reliability of the study. The informed consent form, read to each participant prior to the interview, followed U.S. federal guidelines, as outlined by Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias

(2008) including, "a fair explanation of procedures, description of risks reasonably to be expected, a description of benefits reasonably to be expected, an offer of inquiry regarding the procedures, and an instruction that the person is free to withdraw" (p. 75).

The risks to human subjects associated with this study were minimal. All participants were over 18 years of age, and did not demonstrate any impaired mental capacity, as determined by their ability to engage actively in the organization. Meeting these criteria qualified them as participants in this study. Additionally, all recorded materials will be erased after 5 years, following final approval by the research committee, minimizing any future risks related to confidentiality.

Summary

This chapter outlines the qualitative methodology employed to investigate critical consciousness development within anti-racist social movement organizations. It details Naeem et al.'s (2023) six-step systematic thematic analysis framework and its constructivist underpinnings, explaining how this approach enables both rigorous analysis and conceptual model development. The chapter addresses the researcher's positionality as both scholar and participant in the organization studied, discussing reflexive practices implemented to maintain methodological integrity. It describes the ATLDSA NWGA as the research site, detailing participant recruitment, data collection through three-round semi-structured interviews, and analysis procedures. The chapter provides a comprehensive explanation of the theoretical foundations informing the interview design, drawing on Freire's dialogic approach and Fanon's analysis of internalized oppression. It concludes with discussions of trustworthiness strategies, ethical considerations, and data protection measures. The following chapter will present the findings of this research,

offering both individual consciousness pathways of participants and the thematic analysis that reveals patterns across their experiences.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the research findings on critical consciousness development and the dismantling of internalized oppressive beliefs among members of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), particularly within the Atlanta DSA Northwest Georgia chapter (ATLDSA NWGA). The analysis applies Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic six-step thematic analysis process to identify patterns and themes across participant interviews. The overarching research questions guiding this analysis are: "What conditions within anti-oppressive social movement organizations, such as ATLDSA NWGA, promote the emergence and sustainability of critical consciousness among their members?" and "what conditions within these organizations facilitate the challenge and dismantling of oppressive internalized beliefs?"

Following the systematic thematic analysis process outlined by Naeem et al. (2023), the study identified keywords, developed codes, formulated themes, conceptualized meanings, and developed a conceptual model to understand critical consciousness development within DSA contexts. Through these findings, the conditions that foster critical consciousness and the processes that dismantle internalized oppressive beliefs within DSA are explored.

Participant Demographics

The study sample comprised ten participants representing a diverse range of demographic backgrounds. Racial composition included White (60%), Black/African American (30%), and Asian and Hispanic/Latine participants (5% each). The age distribution spanned from 18-24 (30%) to 25-34 (50%), with smaller representations in the 35-44 and 45-54 age ranges (10% each). Gender identity was predominantly male (80%), with two female participants (20%). This demographic profile largely reflects national DSA membership trends from a 2021 survey, which found that 85% of national membership was White, and 64% identified as men (compared to 27% women and 10% non-binary) (Growth & Development Committee Surveys Team, 2021).

Educational backgrounds were robust, with most participants holding at least a four-year degree (70%), and several possessing professional degrees (40%). The sample also aligned with the national trend of a predominantly millennial membership, with over 60% of national members falling in this age group (between 29 and 44 years old). Regarding DSA membership, participants' tenure varied from 1-2 years (50%) to over 5 years (20%), with the remainder having been members for 2-5 years (30%). Leadership experience was relatively balanced, with seven participants (70%) having held past or present leadership roles within the organization.

Table 3*Participant Demographics*

Participant Code	Race	Age	Gender Identity	Education Level	Length of DSA Membership	Leadership (Past or Present)
MBlack1C	White	18 - 24	Man	4 year degree	1-2 years	Yes
Bmgreen0	Black/A.A.	18 - 24	Man	Some college	1-2 years	Yes
Gpurple9i	White	25 - 34	Man	Professional degree	Over 5 years	Yes
bblue8b	White	45 - 54	Man	Professional degree	2-5 years	Yes
KP3M	White	25 - 34	Woman	4 year degree	1-2 years	No
lyellow0n	Asian	35 - 44	Woman	4 year degree	Over 5 years	No
SB0F	Black/A.A.	18 - 24	Man	Professional degree	1-2 years	No
GOrange1S	Hispanic/Latino	25 - 34	Man	4 year degree	2-5 years	Yes
egreen1w	White	25 - 34	Man	Professional degree	2-5 years	No
Spurple0A	Black/A.A.	25 - 34	Man	4 year degree	1-2 years	Yes

While most participants primarily learned about DSA through social media (50%) or event participation (30%), their pathways into the organization varied, including unique entry points like Bernie Sanders' 2016 campaign. Participants' engagement levels varied significantly, with most reporting participation at 1 day per week, though a few demonstrated high levels of

involvement. Employment was predominantly full-time (70%), with annual household incomes ranging widely from \$20,000 to over \$200,000, primarily clustering between \$40,000 and \$99,999 (90%). Sexual orientation was predominantly heterosexual (80%), with two participants identifying as queer or bisexual. Regarding DSA membership, participants' tenure varied from 1-2 years (50%) to over 5 years (20%), with the remainder having been members for 2-5 years (30%). Leadership experience was relatively balanced, with seven participants (70%) having held past or present leadership roles within the organization.

Participants' Descriptions

This study involved multiple self-identified ATLDSA NWGA members residing primarily in Georgia, with varying levels of involvement in the branch organization. Participants represented diverse backgrounds including Ethiopian immigrants, children of immigrants, individuals from conservative Southern families, and those from more politically progressive households.

Participants' pathways to DSA involvement were diverse. Some joined following the 2016 or 2020 election cycles, while others became involved through campus organizing or after being exposed to DSA through social media and internet research. They represented various ideological positions within the progressive left spectrum, from democratic socialism to more specific socialist identities like Fabian socialism. This diversity of backgrounds and entry points provided rich insights into how critical consciousness emerges across different life experiences and how internalized beliefs are challenged within organizational contexts. Please note that the participants frequently referred to “ATLDSA NWGA” as simply “DSA,” due in part for simplicity’s sake and also because the branch is a member organization of National DSA.

Individual Consciousness Pathways (ICPs)

Spurple0A: First-Generation Ethiopian American: From Libertarian to Socialist

A 25-34-year-old Black man with leadership experience in DSA, this participant's journey to critical consciousness was profoundly shaped by witnessing the stark contradiction between their parents' qualifications and their treatment in American society. Born to Ethiopian immigrants who fled a "communist in name only" military junta, their father, a civil engineer who had "helped build... a hydroelectric dam" in Ethiopia, experienced dramatic downward mobility: "My dad ended up working as a valet for 20 something years... because the US didn't respect the degree that he got."

Initially drawn to libertarian politics in college, their political awakening began through deep reflection on their family's experience. They recalled, "I had nobody to, kind of like, you know, articulate, like, you know, these things and make me start questioning these things." A pivotal moment came when they started asking critical questions about their parents' struggles: "At some point, I just think to myself, like, I don't want people to have to work as hard and, like, have to struggle as much as my parents in order to basically, like, you know, live like, a decent middle-class life."

Their engagement with DSA revealed a transformative approach to organizing. As an organizer in ATLDSA, they developed a unique strategy of recruitment and engagement centered on individual interests and incremental growth: "It's better to provide an avenue for people to be able to, like, you know, be reproductive and basically own. They can become, like, you know, owners of a particular project." This approach was deeply personal, rooted in a belief

that "you are doing it wrong if you are explaining what the DSA is about, rather than explaining how the DSA relates to them."

A key turning point came through conversations that challenged their existing worldview. They described their approach to political dialogue: "I would just express, you know, the discontent that I had with the experiences that I had had up to that point." This method of organizing was deliberate and empathetic, focusing on validating members' experiences: "I kind of want to reward them for each and every step that they do, right, so that they become like, Oh yeah, yeah... validate the experience that this is a productive and like, healthy and happy place."

Their critical consciousness was particularly shaped by ATLDSA events that connected personal experiences to broader systemic analysis. They recalled a transformative moment at an Afro-socialist event: "It was specifically like, what is it like for immigrant and BIPOC people to, like, you know, live in the US and how do you know, capitalism and US hegemony kind of fail at, you know, working with our experiences."

However, their journey was not without challenges. They became critically aware of internal organizational issues, particularly around race and leadership. Reflecting on the DSA's struggles, they observed, "A lot of socialists are outcasts in one form or another, and then they find a niche, and they want to basically have a stranglehold of said niche." This critical perspective extended to the organization's internal dynamics, noting how leadership often failed to create meaningful pathways for engagement.

Despite these challenges, they remained committed to the broader vision of social transformation. As a Provisional AFROSOC organizer, they continued to push for more

inclusive and meaningful organizing strategies, driven by a fundamental belief in collective liberation born from their family's immigrant experience.

Table 4

Spurple0A's Individual Consciousness Pathway (ICP)

ICP Theme	Illustrative Quote
Family Experience of Downward Mobility	"My dad ended up working as a valet for 20 something years... because the US didn't respect the degree that he got."
Questioning Libertarian Principles	"At some point, I just think to myself, like, I don't want people to have to work as hard and, like, have to struggle as much as my parents in order to basically, like, you know, live like, a decent middle class life."
Lack of Critical Framework	"I had nobody to, kind of like, you know, articulate, like, you know, these things and make me start questioning these things."
Empathetic Organizing Approach	"It's better to provide an avenue for people to be able to, like, you know, be reproductive and basically own. They can become, like, you know, owners of a particular project."
Personalized Political Engagement	"You are doing it wrong if you are explaining what the DSA is about, rather than explaining how the DSA relates to them."
Validation-Centered Organizing	"I kind of want to reward them for each and every step that they do, right, so that they become like, Oh yeah, yeah... validate the experience that this is a productive and like, healthy and happy place."
Identity-Based Political Analysis	"It was specifically like, what is it like for immigrant and BIPOC people to, like, you know, live in the US and how do you know, capitalism and US hegemony kind of fail at, you know, working with our experiences."

SB0F: Awakening Through Geographic Mobility and Political Evolution

An African-American Generation Z man who has been a DSA member for 2 years, this participant's critical consciousness emerged through geographic mobility and direct experiences with racism. Growing up in Connecticut in predominantly minority neighborhoods, they initially had a "colorblind" perspective: "I literally thought racism was like, eradicated or something, and that it wasn't really around anymore, because I never experienced social racism as a young kid... When I came to Georgia, there was a tone shift."

Their political journey included a brief period of right-leaning views during high school: "I started, like being more right, leaning, actually more libertarian without knowing it... I would never have identified it with and I wasn't Republican or anything, but I definitely had weird, like thoughts about certain things."

Three pivotal experiences shaped their leftward political evolution. First was Donald Trump's presidency: "Trump's presidency was absolutely horrendous... when he did, like, the Muslim ban and stuff, and I was like, Whoa, what's going on here? It definitely made me rethink... somebody can have this much power, even though, like, I was told we have checks and balances." Second was volunteering at the Atlanta Food Bank: "I saw firsthand all of the systemic roadblocks that are set up for you to fail... all the welfare systems are set up to, you know, to be means tested... I saw the homelessness issue in Atlanta, and I started to realize, like, what I started to question, like, what's at the root of these issues?" Third was becoming an atheist: "I stopped believing God in around ninth grade, ninth or 10th grade... becoming an atheist, I directly contribute to me turning around on, you know, transphobia, homophobia, homophobia, and, yeah, that that's pretty much that."

Their entry into local politics came through a concrete personal experience: "I bought a bike... I start biking around. I'm like, why is there no safe place for me to ride my bike?... I start looking up City Hall and all this stuff." This immersion in local politics helped them realize their individual impact: "That really radicalized me towards local, local politics and getting involved with that, because there's so much you can do if you're willing to, if you're willing to rally the community around your ideas."

What drew them to DSA was their perception of it as a pragmatic organization: "I viewed DSA... I viewed some of the ideals they espoused as in line with mine. And there was no other political group like that, and they also talked about working within the confines of the Democratic Party... it was, to me, a reasonable way to get into politics without engaging in third party shenanigans." Their interest was particularly sparked by the website content about DSA's approach: "the part about them talking about working within the Democratic Party... When I see somebody saying they're willing to try to invade an existing power structure through actual serious means I'm like, Okay, this is serious. This is a path forward."

Table 5

SB0F's Individual Consciousness Pathway (ICP)

ICP Theme	Illustrative Quote
Geographic Displacement Revealing Racism	"I literally thought racism was like, eradicated or something, and that it wasn't really around anymore, because I never experienced social racism as a young kid... When I came to Georgia, there was a tone shift."
Early Conservative Leanings	"I started, like being more right, leaning, actually more libertarian without knowing it... I would never have identified it with and I wasn't

Political Awakening During Trump Presidency	Republican or anything, but I definitely had weird, like thoughts about certain things." "Trump's presidency was absolutely horrendous... when he did, like, the Muslim ban and stuff, and I was like, Whoa, what's going on here? It definitely made me rethink... somebody can have this much power, even though, like, I was told we have checks and balances."
Direct Exposure to Systemic Inequality	"I saw firsthand all of the systemic roadblocks that are set up for you to fail... all the welfare systems are set up to, you know, to be means tested... I saw the homelessness issue in Atlanta, and I started to realize, like, what I started to question, like, what's at the root of these issues?"
Attraction to Pragmatic Organizing	"I viewed DSA... I viewed some of the ideals they espoused as in line with mine. And there was no other political group like that, and they also talked about working within the confines of the Democratic Party... it was, to me, a reasonable way to get into politics without engaging in third party shenanigans."
Strategic Approach to Power	"When I see somebody saying they're willing to try to invade an existing power structure through actual serious means I'm like, Okay, this is serious. This is a path forward."
Local Politics as Pathway to Power	"That really radicalized me towards local, local politics and getting involved with that, because there's so much you can do if you're willing to, if you're willing to rally the community around your ideas."

Bmgreen0: Afrocentric Socialist's Path to Political Engagement

Hailing from Montgomery, Alabama, this participant's critical consciousness journey was fundamentally shaped by their Black identity and Black violence inflicted by agents of the criminal justice system. Early influences came from their mother's approach to treating others: "She's had gay friends, and she's been fine with, like, bringing them around me... she's never

used a homophobic slur... it was just always her big thing. Like, just treat, in a sense, treat everybody the same, because you don't know, you don't know everybody."

A pivotal catalytic moment came with the Trayvon Martin case: "When that had happened, I remember, like, it was Sunday, we're going to church. And my mom was like, oh, wear a hoodie, because for Trayvon Martin... To me that that moment was an example of, like, oh, this is just how black people can be seen." Their pathway to critical consciousness developed further through higher education, particularly when exposed to historical truths obscured in standard curriculum: "Abraham Lincoln was giving, where he said that, you know, black people aren't equal to white people in terms of, like, their humanity." This revelation prompted questioning: "Would I have ever learned about this if I didn't have like, the resource available to like, move out to Colorado to take the AP courses?"

The Ahmaud Arbery case marked their true political awakening: "My real, like, real political awakening, like, Okay, I actually need to do something. Was when Ahmaud Arbery got killed... that was a, like, no doubt, public lynching... That just made me realize, like, okay, no, there's, there's a different political system for, you know, different people." Following this realization, they sought out ways to get involved: "I basically vented my frustrations with the system to a bunch of random people. And I was like, Okay, well, what do I do now? Right? I was like, Okay, well, let me get involved. You know what I mean? So that's what brought me to DSA."

A key factor in their decision was DSA's emphasis on worker-centered politics: "At the time, I think I had a lot more of a worker, worker focused mindset, because I was like, Okay, well, because you can't really engage with these, with what's happening politically, you can't

change the system because of your work." The organization's direct messaging also appealed to them: "They were using, to me, Alder Craig verbiage, and they were calling out the system by name... It wasn't that radical, but it was. Were, they were naming the system, and they're like, listen, we, you have the, you know, we have the power to do something like we are the controllers of the system." The formal structure of DSA meetings impressed them: "The way the meeting was structured. And, you know, I think that's something that DSA does, well, is there's a in obtainment of power, in in, like, rules based processing, you know what I'm saying, where you have, you're having people coming together, and you're all making decisions on how the the chapter moves forward."

Table 6

Bmgreen0's Individual Consciousness Pathway (ICP)

ICP Theme	Illustrative Quote
Early Parental Influence on Inclusivity	"She's had gay friends, and she's been fine with, like, bringing them around me... she's never used a homophobic slur... it was just always her big thing. Like, just treat, in a sense, treat everybody the same, because you don't know, you don't know everybody."
Educational Awakening to Historical Truths	"Abraham Lincoln was giving, where he said that, you know, black people aren't equal to white people in terms of, like, their humanity... Would I have ever learned about this if I didn't have like, the resource available to like, move out to Colorado to take the AP History course?"
Racial Violence as Political Catalyst	"When that had happened, I remember, like, it was Sunday, we're going to church. And my mom was like, oh, wear a hoodie, because for Trayvon Martin... To me that that moment was an example of, like, oh, this is just how black people can be seen."
Initial Work-Centered Political Analysis	"At the time, I think I had a lot more of a worker, worker focused mindset, because I was

	like, Okay, well, because you can't really engage with these, with what's happening politically, you can't change the system because of your work."
Seeking Organizational Outlet	"I basically vented my frustrations with the system to a bunch of random people. And I was like, Okay, well, what do I do now? Right? I was like, Okay, well, let me get involved. You know what I mean? So that's what brought me to DSA."
Attraction to Direct Political Language	"They [DSA] were using, to me, Alder Craig verbiage, and they were calling out the system by name... It wasn't that radical, but it was. Were, they were naming the system, and they're like, listen, we, you have the, you know, we have the power to do something like we are the controllers of the system."
Appreciation for Democratic Structure	"The way the meeting was structured. And, you know, I think that's something that DSA does, well, is there's a in obtainment of power, in in, like, rules based processing, you know what I'm saying, where you have, you're having people coming together, and you're all making decisions on how the the chapter moves forward."

Bblue8b: A Fabian Socialist's Intellectual Path Through Political Disillusionment

As a 45 to 54-year-old White man with a professional degree, retired, and carrying 2 to 5 years of DSA membership this participant's path to critical consciousness was significantly shaped by his engagement with ATLDSA NWGA. Initially feeling politically isolated in a conservative district, he found in DSA a community that validated and expanded his emerging socialist perspectives.

His entry into DSA was motivated by a profound sense of political alienation and personal vulnerability. "I was living here in Rome," he explained, referencing his residence in Marjorie Taylor Greene's extremely conservative congressional district. "I felt incredibly alone, and due to some mental health issues, I was feeling suicidal, and I was trying to find ways to volunteer my time that would put me in contact with people for whom I would have some common interests." The organization became more than a political group—it was a lifeline, providing community, purpose, and hope during a moment of personal crisis.

In addition to serving as a community refuge, ATLDSA NWGA provided a critical framework for understanding his political frustrations. The organization helped him articulate the limitations of existing political structures, particularly during the Trump administration. "Everything I liked was being called socialist," he recalled. "We can't do this. That's socialism. We can't help people. That's socialism." This constant vilification ultimately pushed him to embrace socialist identification more fully.

Through ATLDSA NWGA, he developed a sophisticated understanding of political organizing that went beyond theoretical critique. He emphasized the importance of building genuine connections, noting that effective organizing happens "if you're explaining how the DSA relates to them" rather than imposing abstract ideology. This relational approach reflected his Fabian socialist principles of gradual, bottom-up transformation.

The organization helped him refine his understanding of socialism beyond simplistic narratives. He developed a sophisticated critique of politicians claiming to be socialist, arguing, "They are state capitalists pretending to have an ideology." ATLDSA NWGA provided a space to develop this nuanced analysis, connecting his intellectual background with practical political

engagement. In a similar vein, his approach to socialist organizing remained distinctly principled. "I tend to be of the view that you have to take the long view," he explained. "The revolution cannot be forced. To succeed, you have to have successfully mobilized the working class ahead of time." This perspective was not just theoretical but actively developed through his participation in DSA workshops, community outreach, and internal operations meetings.

His engagement with DSA transformed his understanding of political change from an intellectual exercise to a collective endeavor. By connecting his historical knowledge—shaped by his early exposure to EP Thompson's work and his family's immigrant history—with the practical work of organizing, he found a meaningful path to political engagement that balanced theoretical rigor with practical compassion.

Table 7

Bblue8b's Individual Consciousness Pathway (ICP)

ICP Theme	Illustrative Quote
Political Isolation and Personal Crisis as Catalyst	"I was living here in Rome... I felt incredibly alone, and due to some mental health issues, I was feeling suicidal, and I was trying to find ways to volunteer my time that would put me in contact with people for whom I would have some common interests."
Reclaiming Socialist Identity During Trump Era	"Everything I liked was being called socialist... We can't do this. That socialism. We can't help people. That socialism."
DSA as Community and Political Home	"Basically, I felt, in some ways, as much led to DSA is pushed into DSA, you know, in that, I wanted comradeship. I wanted to find out if I was alone in my views, you know, or at least find people who I could share commonalities with for my own mental well being, as much as anything else, and to feel that I could make a difference."

Developing Relational Organizing Approach	"Yes, right, that that is part of what I think is both a goal and an advantage of DSA is, in some ways, pushing forward the the message of humanity. And I don't mean humanity as like an ideology. I mean the fact that, if you can put before many ordinary people, the fact that I'm a human, it takes away the enemy, the capitalist idea of the socialists are coming to kill your puppies"
Seeking Organizational Outlet	"I basically vented my frustrations with the system to a bunch of random people. And I was like, Okay, well, what do I do now? Right? I was like, Okay, well, let me get involved. You know what I mean? So that's what brought me to DSA."
Praxis Development	"I tend to be of the view that you have to take the long view, that the revolution cannot be forced, that to succeed, you have to have successfully mobilized the working class ahead of time, and that this can lead to a long term end game where you have to push people and push people and push people as far as you can within the political system, to the point that it becomes clear to the average person that you cannot make any more change within the existing political structure."
Appreciation for Democratic Structure	"I am not, and I, in fact, I am vociferously opposed to Vanguardism I do not believe that a revolutionary Vanguard, in the sense of a small clique leading the revolution, will succeed. I believe you can have dedicated revolutionaries, but it must be to be a successful socialist democratic change, it must have the majority of the working class already on board, and that this is a long term game and a long term goal."

GOrange1S: A Colombian-American Organizer's Cultural Tensions and Progressive Evolution

As a Hispanic/Latine man between the ages of 25 and 34 who had been involved with ATLDSA NWGA for 2 to 5 years at the time of our interview, this participant's political

engagement was profoundly shaped by his experiences within the organization. A member for 2-5 years, he became a pivotal organizer, serving on both the Electoral Committee and Steering Committee as an at-large member.

His path to political activism was marked by a profound personal transformation. Initially committed to a film career, he discovered his true calling through political organizing. "I always thought myself as a filmmaker," he recalled, "and never thought of myself as anything in politics." This shift was driven by a desire for meaningful impact: "I only want to do things that I think are meaningful. I care about what film can do for people, about telling stories that emotionally connect."

ATLDSA NWGA emerged as a critical alternative to mainstream political organizing. "I got frustrated working at the Democratic Party of Georgia," he explained, "because I'm like, this is not enough for me. Like this is clearly not as progressive as I want to be, and it's very stifling, and so I wanted to find some sort of outlet to, like, have something else that could be different." His political awakening was rooted in family history and personal experience. Growing up in a large immigrant family with "over 90 relatives in the metro Atlanta area," he navigated complex cultural and political narratives. "My family is very, very, extremely anti-socialist," he shared, referencing the painful political history of Colombia, including violent guerrilla movements and political instability.

The Bernie Sanders campaign also played a crucial role in his political development. "Once Bernie Sanders started talking about some of the issues he believed in," he recalled, "I was like, I believe this is what I believe in as well." This sparked his initial interest in socialist ideas, leading him to explore alternative political organizations like ATLDSA NWGA.

Over the course of his time as a member of ATLDSA NWGA, his approach to political engagement became deeply personal and strategic. "I think being involved in the community in general has served as well in a lot of ways," he noted, highlighting his involvement in DSA's issue campaign canvassing endeavors. "So I think we're good. I think we are able to, like, get in the eyes of the public and recruit people." This reflected the value and success of a relationally pragmatic approach to building political alternatives. Reflecting on his journey, he emphasized the importance of finding a political home that aligned with his values. "I was trying to find ways to volunteer my time that would put me in contact with people for whom I would have some common interests," he explained. ATLDSA NWGA provided that space, offering an outlet for his growing political consciousness.

Notably, he saw DSA not as an end in itself, but as a critical tool for broader social transformation. "To me, it's less about DSA specifically, and more about what DSA does," he argued. "We need to maintain what we have...we need to have a sustained movement that is growing stronger and stronger as we go." In the end, his evolution illustrates the complex path of political awakening, from a young person navigating family narratives and career expectations to an engaged organizer committed to collective change. ATLDSA NWGA became more than an organization; it was a pathway to understanding and practicing his own political potential and the possibilities of collective action.

Table 8*GOrangeIS's Individual Consciousness Pathway (ICP)*

ICP Theme	Illustrative Quote
Career Shift from Film to Political Organizing	"I always thought myself as a filmmaker, and never thought of myself as anything in politics." "I only want to do things that I think are meaningful. I care about what film can do for people, about telling stories that emotionally connect."
Disillusionment with Mainstream Politics	"I got frustrated working at the Democratic Party of Georgia because I'm like, this is not enough for me. Like this is clearly not as progressive as I want to be, and it's very stifling, and so I wanted to find some sort of outlet to, like, have something else that could be different."
Navigating Family's Anti-Socialist Politics	"My family is very, very, extremely anti-socialist [referencing the painful political history of Colombia, including violent guerrilla movements and political instability]."
Finding Value-Aligned Political Community	"I was trying to find ways to volunteer my time that would put me in contact with people for whom I would have some common interests."
Instrumental View of Organizational Involvement	"To me, it's less about DSA specifically, and more about what DSA does. We need to maintain what we have... We need to have a sustained movement that is growing stronger and stronger as we go."
Power of Relational Organizing	"I think being involved in the community in general has served as well in a lot of ways, like we recruit a lot of people during the Roe v Wade protests, and so being a big part of that, and sponsoring it, and speaking at it was, think is very important, and stuff like that. So I think we're good. I think we are able to, like, get in the eyes of the public and recruit people."
Coalition-Building and Direct Action	"I think we've done a really good job at being very involved politically when it comes to canvassing, protesting. Being at the Capitol, you know, being involved with Stop Cop City is another great example, like, you know, being involved with the coalition of people, and not

just ourselves, and that helps grow the chapter as well.”

Egreen1w: From Political Insider to Critical Organizer

As a 25 to 34-year-old White man and 2-to-5-year member of DSA, this participant's political journey was shaped by a complex navigation between insider political experience and grassroots activism. As a former organizer in Broward County, Florida, He brought a unique perspective from his early career working in Georgia state government during the Roy Barnes administration.

His political consciousness began to form during his time working in the governor's office, where he was exposed to the inner workings of political institutions. As a young staffer in constituent services, he processed correspondence that revealed systemic challenges, particularly those related to criminal justice, corrections, and legal issues. This early experience planted seeds of critical awareness about institutional limitations. Music and artistic expression also played a crucial role in his political development. Before his political organizing, he was part of a hip-hop collective, navigating a "duplicitous lifestyle" between professional political work and artistic expression. This experience taught him about the power of community and collective action.

A personal setback became a transformative moment in his political development. In 2000, he was arrested for drug possession, an experience that dramatically altered his career trajectory. "I got arrested," he recalled, "and my mug shot was the lead story on the evening

news." This moment forced a reconsideration of his personal and professional path, leading to a period of recovery and personal reflection.

His entry into DSA came through a seemingly casual connection. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic after having moved to northwest Georgia, he joined a Zoom call with ATLDSA NWGA, drawn by a desire to find political meaning and community. "I felt incredibly alone," he explained, echoing a common experience of political awakening. The Bernie Sanders campaigns had already begun to shift his political understanding, challenging his previous neoliberal perspectives.

As time went by, ATLDSA NWGA provided a framework for understanding his political frustrations. The organization helped him move beyond the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality he had previously embraced. "I always thought myself as someone who believed in capitalism and that there needs to be guard rails," he reflected, "but I started questioning those assumptions." His approach to organizing was deeply influenced by his experience of feeling like an outsider. He was drawn to DSA as a way to connect with people who shared his emerging political consciousness. "I was trying to find ways to volunteer my time that would put me in contact with people for whom I would have some common interests," he explained.

By his testimony, his involvement in ATLDSA NWGA was characterized by a commitment to incremental change and building community. He participated in workshops, community outreach, and helped organize chapter activities, including book clubs and chapter elections. The organization provided a space to channel his political energy and develop a more sophisticated understanding of social change.

His path demonstrates how political awareness evolves through personal experiences, community involvement, and the critical evaluation of one's own beliefs. Transitioning from a young conservative political staffer to an ATLDSA NWGA member and organizer, he discovered a more purposeful approach to political participation that integrates self-reflection with collective activism.

Table 9

Eggreenlw's Individual Consciousness Pathway (ICP)

ICP Theme	Illustrative Quote
Early Political Insider Experience	"So I got an internship. My dad got me an internship working there, and did that for a couple months, and then Roy Barnes ended up winning the governor's race, and I got asked to come work first for his Inauguration Committee."
Bernie Sanders Campaign as Transformative Influence	"The Rainbow Coalition nature of Bernie, the Medicare for all thing was what really got me... Like, literally, like, the first kind of person who it was, like, clear, very clear that these were policies that would improve lives for a lot of people, and then the fact that he wasn't bought, you know."
Relational Organizing Through Personal Connection	"When I was on that Zoom call with the guy from Broward County, DSA, his was very much like an echo of what Bernie was, The Bernie platform... it kind of filters into all the other societies."
Questioning Capitalist Assumptions	"I always thought myself as someone who believed in capitalism and that there needs to be guard rails, but I started questioning those assumptions."
Privilege Recognition as Catalyst for Action	"There's an element of white privilege. I can not have to be involved to change things because really, the status quo is going to work okay for me."
Uniting Personal Experience and Political Analysis	"Developing policies for the working class is like, it's almost like the common denominator,

so to speak, you know, like you focus on those issues, it kind of filters into all the other societies. So I got involved. I was like, I'm into it. Like, I want to give a shot."

Yellow0n: From Immigrant Marginalization to Political Engagement

As an Asian woman between the ages of 35 and 44 with a four-year degree, currently unable to work, and a longtime DSA member of over five years, she found a vital outlet for her political development through ATLDSA NWGA, especially in tenant rights advocacy and community organizing.

Her entry into DSA was pragmatic and personal. "Someone in DC told me, 'Hey, maybe you want to join DSA, because you're so passionate about tenant rights,'" she recalled. Initially drawn by the organization's growing visibility during Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's rise to prominence, she was intrigued by the potential of collective action. "I think when I joined AOC was very popular," she explained, "and it appealed to me, like, the proud counting people there could possibly be."

Grounded in practicality shaped by her working-class immigrant background, she engaged with DSA in a highly pragmatic manner. "I never actually found any use for DSA in the size of it," she admitted, "but what it did appeal to was, like, wow, there's a lot of people." The organization's Slack channel became an initial point of engagement, offering a space for practical problem-solving. "They had a Slack that I could ask questions in," she said. When her neighbor needed information about utility bills, she found a supportive community. "I did ask that

question in the Slack. That was helpful. I got a lot of responses. Like, I guess I could have just asked Reddit, but I didn't want to do that. I didn't know those people. I did feel better asking the Slack."

What distinguished ATLDSA NWGA for her was its commitment to principled engagement. "What I do like about DSA is I like the rules," she emphasized. "I like that we are all engaging, and you are supposed to engage in good faith, even if it's an online space or wherever space, you are supposed to engage in good faith." This approach resonated with her desire for meaningful, respectful political dialogue. Relatedly, her organizational involvement was intentionally scaled and personal. "I went to a few meetings," she explained, "But I don't know if I ever did anything with them, aside from finding a few members and working on smaller projects instead of whatever the main chapter was working on." This approach allowed her to maintain agency while contributing to collective efforts.

Reflecting her working-class immigrant background, she approached political engagement pragmatically. "I think above all, above like gender identity, sexuality, the thing that defines me the most is probably my tax bracket, my income bracket, being poor," she noted. This perspective drove her interest in practical organizing around tenant rights and economic justice.

Her critical consciousness was shaped by a lifetime of navigating systemic barriers. Growing up in a family that embodied the "keep your head down" immigrant mentality, she developed a unique perspective on political engagement. "We were always poor," she recalled, "and we never talked about politics. We learned in school, but I never really thought it mattered to me." Markedly, ATLDSA NWGA provided a framework for translating personal struggles into collective action. By connecting with other members around specific projects and shared

concerns, she found a way to challenge the systemic inequities she had long observed but felt powerless to address.

Tracing the interviewee's trajectory from a childhood undergirded by poverty to their contemporary participation in addressing the mechanisms that allowed for that poverty, this interviewee's testimony reveals how political consciousness develops through practical engagement, community support, and a willingness to challenge existing systems. From feeling like an outsider to becoming an active participant in tenant organizing, she transformed her experiences of marginalization into a platform for collective change.

Table 10

lyellow0n's Individual Consciousness Pathway (ICP)

ICP Theme	Illustrative Quote
Practical Entry through Issue-Specific Organizing	"Someone in DC told me, 'Hey, maybe you want to join DSA, because you're so passionate about tenant rights.'"
Attraction to Collective Scale and Potential	"I think when I joined AOC was very popular, and it appealed to me, like, the proud counting people there could possibly be." "What it did appeal to was, like, wow, there's a lot of people."
Immigrant Background Shaping Political Perspective	"We were always poor, and we never talked about politics. We learned in school, but I never really thought it mattered to me."
Digital Community as Practical Resource	"They had a Slack that I could ask questions in... I did ask that question in the Slack. That was helpful. I got a lot of responses. Like, I guess I could have just asked Reddit, but I didn't want to do that. I didn't know those people. I did feel better asking the Slack."
Valuing Principled Engagement	"What I do like about DSA is I like the rules. I like that we are all engaging, and you are supposed to engage in good faith, even if it's an

	online space or wherever space, you are supposed to engage in good faith."
Class Identity as Primary Political Lens	"I think above all, above like gender identity, sexuality, the thing that defines me the most is probably my tax bracket, my income bracket, being poor."
Uniting Personal Experience and Political Analysis	"Developing policies for the working class is like, it's almost like the common denominator, so to speak, you know, like you focus on those issues, it kind of filters into all the other societies. So I got involved. I was like, I'm into it. Like, I want to give a shot."

KP3M: From Personal Struggle to Collective Action

A 25 to 34-year-old White woman with a four-year degree, employed full-time, this interviewee's political consciousness was profoundly shaped by her 2-year engagement with DSA, a journey that began during the isolating months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Her political education emerged through unexpected channels. Online content creators became her initial window into socialist perspectives. "They taught me about unions," she recalled, "and gave me a different perspective of the news. It was a way for me to consume news and not feel like I was going insane in the 24-hour news cycle." Specifically, she found resonance in content that explained "how, in other countries, socialism works" and provided a critical breakdown of why "the Democratic Party sucked, because they're not really fighting for what I believe in."

The pandemic became a crucial moment of political awakening. "I was at home all day, I was going crazy," she explained. "So I just had to do something to keep my mind occupied. I wanted

something to do that made me feel like I was contributing positively in some way." This desire for meaningful engagement led her to ATLDSA NWGA in 2022.

Her involvement began with a specific campaign around workers' rights that directly intersected with her professional life. When ATLDSA organizers reached out about a campaign for public sector workers' bargaining rights, she was immediately interested. "They asked, 'What do you do for a living?' I was like, 'Well, funny enough, I am a university employee. I would love to be able to unionize. I didn't even think that was an option.'" This moment crystallized her understanding of collective action and worker empowerment.

Of particular importance, ATLDSA NWGA offered her a new lens for understanding political organizing. "What DSA does really well is actually planning and organizing," she observed. "I think they know how to set up a campaign and do it pretty well for the limited amount of resources that we have." This pragmatic approach contrasted sharply with her previous political experiences. "For a lot of the political things I saw for the left, there was not much organization. So it was nice to see there was some organization. There was a lot of passion." Similarly, the organization's structure and membership impressed her. "People are very smart who are running this chapter," she noted. "They understood, they had a lot of experience in organizing. There were some older members. There were people from all across the spectrum." This diversity and depth of experience created a welcoming environment where "getting involved was very easy."

Her critical consciousness evolved through this engagement. The Bernie Sanders campaign had already begun to shift her understanding, making her realize, "It's not my fault that I'm poor. I'm poor because of greedy corporations and the class system we live under." DSA

provided a framework to deepen this analysis, offering both theoretical understanding and practical organizing opportunities. Serving as a community of likeminded people similarly navigating the challenges of capitalism, the organization became more than just a political group—it was a space for personal and collective transformation. "I started going to meetings and actually talking to people," she explained. This was the "catalyst of how I became a DSA member, like an active DSA member."

All in all, this study participant's consciousness pathway displays how political consciousness develops through community, collective action, and a willingness to engage beyond individual experience. From feeling isolated and frustrated to becoming an active participant in socialist organizing, she found a path to understanding systemic challenges and potential collective solutions.

Table 11

KP3M's Individual Consciousness Pathway (ICP)

ICP Theme	Illustrative Quote
Practical Entry through Issue-Specific Organizing	"Someone in DC told me, 'Hey, maybe you want to join DSA, because you're so passionate about tenant rights.'"
Pandemic Isolation as Catalyst for Engagement	"I was at home all day, I was going crazy. So I just had to do something to keep my mind occupied. I wanted something to do that made me feel like I was contributing positively in some way."
Personal-Political Connection Through Labor Issues	"They asked, 'What do you do for a living?' I was like, 'Well, funny enough, I am a university employee. I would love to be able to unionize. I didn't even think that was an option.'"
Appreciation for Organizational Effectiveness	"What DSA does really well is actually planning and organizing. I think they know how to set up a campaign and do it pretty well for

	the limited amount of resources that we have." "For a lot of the political things I saw for the left, there was not much organization. So it was nice to see there was some organization. There was a lot of passion."
Valuing Diverse Expertise and Experience	"People are very smart who are running this chapter. They understood, they had a lot of experience in organizing. There were some older members. There were people from all across the spectrum."
Shift from Individual to Systemic Analysis	"It's not my fault that I'm poor. I'm poor because of greedy corporations and the class system we live under."
"I started going to meetings and actually talking to people. [This was the] catalyst of how I became a DSA member, like an active DSA member."	"I started going to meetings and actually talking to people. [This was the] catalyst of how I became a DSA member, like an active DSA member."

Gpurple9i: From Military Background to Socialist Organizing

As a 25 to 34-year-old White man with a professional degree, employed full-time, and over 5 years of experience as a member of DSA, this participant's political journey was profoundly shaped by his experiences growing up in a military family and navigating complex political landscapes in Northwest Georgia. Born in North Dakota but deeply rooted in Northwest Georgia, he grew up in a household steeped in military culture and conservative values. "I lived on a military base, our school was on base," he recalled. "There were very few outside resources of information. The only sources of information that I had were from my parents, the school system, and the immediate people in my life."

His initial political stance was one of complete apolitical disengagement. "I was very privileged to think that I was insulated from politics," he explained. "I was like, 'Oh, who cares

about government? That's just for, you know, it's none of it really means anything. It's all just made up bullshit. Nobody really cares.'" This attitude persisted through his early years, despite living in environments deeply shaped by political and military structures.

A pivotal moment came through an unexpected source—a documentary on income inequality by Robert Reich. "I would do a lot of research, basically be like, oh, what policies work better? I ended up looking at what policies ended up working better. Or a lot of like, you know, progressive, or like, you know, leftist policies, kind of like, you know, what Finland does with homeless people, right?" This initial exposure began to crack his apolitical shell.

The Bernie Sanders campaigns and the emergence of DSA provided a transformative political framework. "DSA that, like, gave socialism a presence in media that wasn't just, like, scary, terrible, horrible things," he noted. More importantly, he saw an organization that offered concrete pathways for engagement: "If these people can run an organization, I can run a campus organization."

As his political consciousness developed further with under the aegis of DSA, his approach to organizing became deeply relational and incremental. "It's better to provide an avenue for people to be able to, like, you know, be reproductive and basically own. They can become, like, you know, owners of a particular project," he explained. This philosophy drove his decision to start a Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) chapter at Kennesaw State University.

After graduating and joining with ATLDSA NWGA, his organizational experiences further revealed to him the potential of collective action. "At some point, I just think to myself,

like, I don't want people to have to work as hard and, like, have to struggle as much as my parents in order to basically, like, you know, live like, a decent middle class life," he reflected. This personal motivation transformed his understanding of political engagement from an abstract concept to a concrete necessity.

His organizing approach focused on creating accessible entry points for political engagement. "Hey, you know, you want to come help us work with this hunger organization? You want to come help us do this demonstration with this racial justice organization?" This strategy was about "providing people with the space to engage with politics and government, like providing a platform for people so it didn't feel like they were doing it on their own."

As he mentions specifically, his transformation from his military-conservative upbringing to socialist organizing was gradual but profound. "I grew up thinking, like a lot of people in Gen Z were taught in schools, we're past racism, we're past nationalism," he explained. "Those are all problems. Yeah, they were bad and terrible, but, like, we solved all that 40 years ago. Everything's fine now."

Ultimately, his journey illustrates how political consciousness develops through personal reflection, community engagement, and a willingness to challenge inherited narratives. From a young person who believed politics "didn't matter" to an active campus organizer, he found a path to understanding systemic challenges and collective solutions.

Table 12*Gpurple9i's Individual Consciousness Pathway (ICP)*

ICP Theme	Illustrative Quote
Military Upbringing and Information Isolation	"I lived on a military base, our school was on base. There were very few outside resources of information. The only sources of information that I had were from my parents, the school system, and the immediate people in my life."
Initial Apolitical Stance	"I was very privileged to think that I was insulated from politics. I was like, 'Oh, who cares about government? That's just for, you know, it's none of it really means anything. It's all just made up bullshit. Nobody really cares.'"
Reconceptualizing Socialism Through DSA	"DSA that, like, gave socialism a presence in media that wasn't just, like, scary, terrible, horrible things."
Confidence Building Through Organizational Exposure	"If these people can run an organization, I can run a campus organization."
Valuing Diverse Expertise and Experience	"People are very smart who are running this chapter. They understood, they had a lot of experience in organizing. There were some older members. There were people from all across the spectrum."
Developing Relational Organizing Approach	"It's better to provide an avenue for people to be able to, like, you know, be reproductive and basically own. They can become, like, you know, owners of a particular project."
Connecting Personal Experience to Systemic Analysis	"At some point, I just think to myself, like, I don't want people to have to work as hard and, like, have to struggle as much as my parents in order to basically, like, you know, live like, a decent middle-class life."

MBlack1C: From Conservative Debates to Leftist Solidarity

A White man aged 18-24 with a four-year degree and a past leadership role in the DSA, this participant experienced a significant shift in his political development, moving from

conservative debate culture to dedicated socialist organizing. His early political identity was shaped by a combative conservative environment. Growing up with a father whose racial views were deeply problematic, he developed an initial political stance defined by opposition. "I am pretty much the antithesis of my dad," he recalled. His father's racist attitudes—including pulling him out of football because of Black coaches—became a catalyst for his own political development.

Initially drawn to conservative and libertarian politics, he found validation in debate culture. "I developed the ability to argue and debate," he explained. "I was really good at that, which made me kind of hard to argue with." This period was characterized by consuming conservative media, watching content from figures like Ben Shapiro, Steven Crowder, and Jordan Peterson. "The algorithms just immediately started feeding me Ben Shapiro debate content, Steven Crowder content, Jordan Peterson content," he noted.

A pivotal transformation began through conversations with a coworker named Rob. "He introduced me to Destiny," an online commentator who challenged his existing political views. The argument about generational wealth became particularly transformative. "When I heard about that, and it was like the idea that, like, you know, normally, white families have a lot more generational wealth, which imposes these advantages, and black families, for obvious reasons, don't have that... I was like, 'Oh crap, I think I'm wrong.'"

His critical consciousness developed through a deep examination of masculinity and power structures. He became increasingly critical of online influencers who exploit male insecurities. "To me, there is almost a unique variety of scum to sell those kinds of issues to men who are already on a path that will harm others in their lives, but also themselves," he explained.

This critique was deeply personal, rooted in understanding how toxic masculinity had impacted his own father.

After graduating from Kennesaw State University and transitioning out of the campus' YDSA, this participant mentions that ATLDSA NWGA became a critical space for developing his political understanding. He saw the organization as a vehicle for addressing systemic issues beyond individual struggles. "I find more opportunities for that within DSA than, say, like the Atlanta Democratic Party or the Georgia Democrats," he noted. The organization offered more than just electoral politics—it provided a framework for understanding intersectional oppression.

His approach to organizing was fundamentally relational. "I want to talk more about what our leftism is," he explained. "What do anarchists think? What do libertarian socialists think? What do Marxists think?" This curiosity drove his engagement, pushing beyond surface-level political debates to deeper systemic analysis. Gender politics became a critical area of focus. "I find that leftist men are the ones who actually need to, like, lead those conversations and become more comfortable with combating that stuff online and in real life," he argued. This perspective reflected a commitment to challenging toxic masculinity and creating more supportive male communities.

The most significant social event during his early activism was a dinner he organized for the Northwest Georgia DSA branch. "It was really cool to see a bunch of people from so many different parts of northwest Georgia... come together," he recalled. The gathering represented more than just a social event—it was a space for sharing experiences of marginalization and building collective solidarity.

When viewed comprehensively, his journey illustrates how political consciousness develops through personal reflection, challenging inherited narratives, and building genuine connections. From a young person steeped in conservative debate culture to a committed socialist organizer, he found a path to understanding systemic challenges and the importance of collective action.

Table 13

Mblack1c's Individual Consciousness Pathway (ICP)

ICP Theme	Illustrative Quote
Father's Conservatism as Counterpoint	"I am pretty much the antithesis of my dad. My dad was grew up in the late 50s, early sixth watch that he was born in 1957 so he grew up largely in the 60s and early 70s. He comes from Dalton, Georgia, which previously was like white working class and, you know, definitely not an area where you would find lots of progressives."
Early Immersion in Conservative Media	"The algorithms just immediately started feeding me Ben Shapiro debate content, Steven Crowder content, Jordan Peterson content."
Pivotal Interpersonal Dialogue	"To me, there is almost a unique variety of scum to sell those kinds of issues to men who are already on a path that will harm others in their lives, but also themselves." "I find that leftist men are the ones who actually need to, like, lead those conversations and become more comfortable with combating that stuff online and in real life."
Critique of Toxic Masculinity	"If these people can run an organization, I can run a campus organization."
DSA as Forum for Deeper Ideological Exploration	"I want to talk more about what our leftism is. What do anarchists think? What do libertarian socialists think? What do Marxists think?"
Systemic vs. Individual Analysis Development	"Leftism is a bit more coherent because it dismantles them together, and also the way that capitalism uniquely impacts men and women. Liberals, they've been talking about that, right?"

Community Building Through Shared Experiences

But they are not comfortable dismantling capitalism. In my mind, that means you're not comfortable dismantling everything that's wrong."

"It was really cool to see a bunch of people from so many different parts of northwest Georgia... come together... We all have these shared grievances and these shared traumas. And like, to an extent, it's really, it's just a dinner at some restaurant actors or Kendall saw but it is nice to know that we have these shared experiences, no matter who we are, and we ultimately just want to make things better."

Systematic Thematic Analysis Findings

Following Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis process, the study developed themes that address the research questions. Each theme represents meaningful patterns identified through the selection of keywords, development of codes, and thematic interpretation.

Catalytic Experiences for Critical Consciousness

The first major theme addresses the catalytic experiences that sparked critical consciousness development. Through the keyword selection and coding processes, the study identified consistent patterns in how participants described moments that challenged their previous understanding of social systems.

For first-generation immigrant participants, witnessing their parents' downward mobility despite education and hard work profoundly challenged meritocratic narratives: "My dad ended up working as a valet for 20 something years... because the US didn't respect the degree that he

got” (Spurple0A). This participant articulated how this contradiction led to questioning libertarian principles: "People who gave up this much shouldn't, like, need to struggle this much, right" (Spurple0A)?

For Black participants, experiences with direct or observed racism created early awareness of systemic injustice. One participant described how the Trayvon Martin case transformed their understanding: "When that had happened, I remember, like, it was Sunday, we're going to church. And my mom was like, oh, wear a hoodie, because for Trayvon Martin... To me that that moment was an example of, like, oh, this is just how black people can be seen” (Bmgreen0). Geographic displacement also emerged as another significant catalyst, particularly for participants who moved between different regions of the country: "I literally thought racism was like, eradicated or something, and that it wasn't really around anymore, because I never experienced social racism as a young kid... when I came to Georgia, there was a tone shift” (SB0F).

Applying Naeem et al.'s (2023) conceptualization through interpretation, these experiences functioned as what Paulo Freire would call “conscientização” (Freire, 2000, p. 67) moments, which are catalysts that created cognitive dissonance between lived experience and dominant narratives, initiating the process of critical consciousness development.

Safe Spaces for Processing Contradictions

The second theme identified through systematic analysis concerns the role of safe spaces in processing contradictions between lived experiences and dominant narratives. Keywords

related to community, belonging, and processing emerged consistently across interviews, leading to codes about educational environments and organizational spaces.

College environments often served as initial safe spaces for many participants: "I started going to college in 2010... and that's when things started to dramatically change... I met people from all across the spectrum. I got involved in some LGBTQ... youth groups when I went to college" (KP3M). These spaces allowed participants to articulate and explore emerging critical perspectives with peers experiencing similar shifts.

Similarly, ATLDSA NWGA provided another layer of community for processing contradictions, especially during periods of political awakening: "DSA that, like, gave socialism a presence in media that wasn't just, like, scary, terrible, horrible things" (Gpurple9i). One participant described seeking out DSA specifically because "I felt incredibly alone... I was trying to find ways to volunteer my time that would put me in contact with people for whom I would have some common interests" (bblue8b). However, the effectiveness of DSA as a safe space varied considerably based on organizational practices. Participants described the importance of non-judgmental environments where ideological development wasn't rushed: "These may be like, you know, little because these may seem like, you know, little steps, right? But I kind of want to reward them for each and every step that they do" (Spurple0A).

Through the conceptualization process described by Naeem et al. (2023), the study interpreted these patterns as revealing the critical importance of community-based spaces where emerging critical consciousness can be safely explored and developed through dialogue with others experiencing similar transformations.

Challenging Internalized Capitalism and Individualism

The analysis revealed consistent patterns of how participants recognized and challenged internalized capitalist and individualist beliefs. Keywords related to research, alternative frameworks, and collective approaches appeared frequently in the data, leading to codes about dismantling dominant ideologies. For many, research and exposure to alternative frameworks were vital: "I would do like, a lot of like, you know, research, basically be like, oh, what policies work better I ended up, what policies ended up working better? Or a lot of like, you know, progressive, or like, you know, leftist policies, kind of like, you know, what Finland does with homeless people, right" (Spurple0A)?

Connection to concrete organizing further challenged individualism: "It was just, you know, providing people with the space to engage with politics and government, like providing a platform for people so it didn't feel like they were doing it on their own" (Gpurple9i). Through collective action, participants experienced the limitations of individualist approaches to social change. One participant explicitly described making this shift from internalized individualism to collective consciousness: "At some point, just think to myself, like, I don't want people to have to work as hard and, like, have to struggle as much as my parents in order to basically, like, you know, live like, a decent middle class life" (Spurple0A).

Through the conceptualization process, these patterns developed as revealing how DSA at its best provides both theoretical frameworks and concrete experiences that help members recognize and challenge internalized ideologies that support oppressive systems.

Relational Organizing as Critical Pedagogy

A significant theme identified through the analysis was the importance of relational organizing practices in sustaining critical consciousness development. Keywords related to dialogue, connection, incremental growth, and validation emerged consistently, leading to codes about effective pedagogical approaches.

Successful organizers described approaches that centered members' interests and experiences rather than imposing predetermined frameworks: "I would just express, you know, the discontent that I had with the experiences that I had had up to that point." (Gpurple9i) Another emphasized that effective organizing happens "if you're explaining how the DSA relates to them" rather than explaining abstract ideology (Spurple0A). Another participant described intentionally creating opportunities for members to lead projects aligned with their interests: "It's better to provide an avenue for people to be able to, like, you know, be reproductive and basically own. They can become, like, you know, owners of a particular project" (Spurple0A).

Those who experienced successful critical consciousness development through ATLDSA NWGA described environments that validated incremental growth: "I kind of want to reward them for each and every step that they do, right, so that they become like, Oh yeah, yeah. Kind of like, you know, validate the experience that this is a productive and like, healthy and happy place." (Spurple0A)

Through the conceptual interpretation process, the study identified these patterns as reflecting principles of Freire's critical pedagogy, emphasizing dialogue, problem-posing

education, and connection to lived experience. This theme reveals how effective critical consciousness development depends not just on content but on pedagogical approach.

Identity Integration in Critical Consciousness Development

The analysis also revealed the importance of integrating identity-based understanding with systemic critique for sustained critical consciousness. Keywords related to race, gender, class, and intersectionality appeared consistently, leading to codes about identity-centered approaches. One participant explicitly argued for identity-centered politics against class-reductionist approaches: "To me, it's that that kind of class first, like analysis that that washes away identity... identity is important because it grounds you in, in why you do certain things, and how they like, how your classes" (Bmgreen0).

Gender analysis emerged as another vital component of critical consciousness: "I find that leftist men are the ones who actually need to, like, lead those conversations and become more comfortable with combating that stuff online and in real life... it needs to be men who hold other men accountable" (MBlack1C1). This reflected understanding of how gendered responsibilities shape effective anti-oppressive organizing. First-generation immigrant participants emphasized how their identities shaped their analysis of capitalism: "I think above all, above like gender identity, sexuality, the thing that defines me the most is probably my tax bracket, my income bracket, being poor." (lyellow0n) This revealed how class identity intertwined with other aspects of identity rather than superseding them.

The analysis illuminated a crucial insight about critical consciousness development: true transformative understanding requires a holistic approach that centers identity as fundamental,

not peripheral, to systemic analysis. By integrating multiple dimensions of identity, race, gender, class, and lived experience, radical movements can develop more nuanced, powerful frameworks for understanding oppression and pursuing social change.

Praxis Pathways

The final theme in the systematic analysis addressed how participants moved from systemic critique to engaged transformative action. Keywords related to local engagement, coalition-building, leadership development, and long-term orientation appeared frequently, leading to codes about pathways to action. For example, local political engagement emerged as a critical pathway from critique to action: "I bought a bike... I start biking around. I'm like, why is the why is there no safe place for me to ride my bike?... I start looking up city hall and all this stuff" (SB0F). This participant described how concrete local issues provided more accessible entry points to political action than abstract ideological commitment.

Coalition-building around specific projects facilitated action: "Hey, you know, you want to come help us work with this hunger organization. You want to come help us do this demonstration with this racial justice organization" (Gpurple9i)? These concrete collaborations created measurable impacts that sustained engagement. Similarly, some participants emphasized the importance of pragmatic approaches to power while maintaining transformative visions: "We can't, we can't let go, and we can't, we can't detach ourselves from the political process. Because when we detach from existing power structures, that's when we really lose" (SB0F). This reflected a sophisticated understanding of how to navigate existing systems while working toward fundamental transformation.

As it related to this conceptual interpretation, the systematic analysis revealed how critical consciousness requires deliberate translation into concrete action to maintain its vitality and potential for social transformation. Organizational practices play a crucial role in either facilitating or impeding this critical transition from systemic critique to active engagement.

Barriers to Sustained Critical Consciousness

The systematic analysis identified significant organizational barriers that undermined the development and sustainability of critical consciousness. Keywords related to inaccessibility, hierarchy, burnout, and contradictory practices appeared frequently, leading to codes about organizational limitations. Geographic accessibility emerged as a significant barrier, particularly for members who lived outside the urban core where most meetings were held:

"ATL DSA, particularly in the post covid era, has begun to shift to more in person events, but all of those events have been very, very focused on Midtown or areas south of midtown... it's not that I disagree with the specific event some or like the ideology of the events as it is, frankly, really hard to get to them." (bblue8b)

This geographic inaccessibility particularly impacted members with limited transportation options or those living in more conservative areas who might most benefit from community support. As one participant noted, the time commitment for travel became prohibitive: "I'm just to get to the event I'm committing to probably about two and a half hours of driving." (bblue8b)

Additionally, several participants described how hierarchical and opaque organizational practices undermined the development of critical consciousness by contradicting the democratic values the organization claimed to uphold:

"General meetings are hard to get to for particularly for people who are not in Midtown. And even when they are there, they are very, very scripted... They were suppressing the speech to begin with, to keep the meeting flowing smoothly... And thus they became focused more on the flow of the meeting than on the purpose of the meeting." (bblue8b)

Another participant expressed frustration with the lack of transparency in organizational processes: "This is anti socialist. Bro, like, like, this is, this is anti lefty... Why is everything so secret?" (Bmgreen0). These organizational contradictions were particularly damaging because they undermined the organization's credibility as a space for developing anti-hierarchical consciousness.

A broader theme underlying many of these barriers was the contradiction between the organization's stated values and actual practices. When organizational practices failed to embody anti-oppressive values, members experienced cognitive dissonance that undermined rather than supported critical consciousness development:

"When I say I am a bottom up organizing person. I've said this several times that I feel it's very important to a healthy organization to have that bottom up. I think there is not enough opportunity in Atlanta for the the majority, to participate, to excuse, to participate actively in the process" (bblue8b).

Another participant directly critiqued the contradiction between socialist values and secretive organizational practices: "This is anti socialist. Bro, like, this is, this is anti lefty... Why is everything so secret" (Bmgreen0)?

For some participants, these contradictions specifically involved the gap between the organization's stated commitment to racial justice and the lived experiences of BIPOC members:" A lot of POC people actually ended up leaving the organization" (Spurple0A). This participant suggested the exodus was directly linked to the organization's failure to adequately center racial analysis in its organizing.

The mismatch between DSA's professed commitment to accessibility and the reality of its meeting locations created another value-practice contradiction:

"We talk about accessibility, but when meetings are only held in locations that require cars to access, or at times that exclude working parents, it contradicts our values about inclusivity" (KP3M).

The analysis illuminates a fundamental disconnect between DSA's espoused anti-oppressive principles and their actual implementation within organizational structures. This incongruence creates significant cognitive dissonance for members, actively hindering rather than fostering the development of critical consciousness. Such contradictions function as substantial obstacles to consciousness-raising work, suggesting that theoretical adherence to progressive ideals remains insufficient. For transformative development to occur, organizations must demonstrate praxis—the living embodiment of their stated values through concrete organizational policies, accessible meeting structures, transparent leadership transitions, and inclusive decision-making processes. The findings indicate that when members perceive inconsistency between an organization's rhetorical commitments and their lived experiences within that space, the legitimacy of the entire consciousness-raising enterprise becomes compromised.

Summary of Findings

This study applied Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic six-step thematic analysis process to develop seven themes that capture the conditions and processes related to critical consciousness development within anti-oppressive social movement organizations: (1) Catalytic Experiences for Critical Consciousness, (2) Safe Spaces for Processing Contradictions, (3) Challenging Internalized Capitalism and Individualism, (4) Relational Organizing as Critical Pedagogy, (5) Barriers to Sustained Critical Consciousness, (6) Identity Integration in Critical Consciousness Development, and (7) Praxis Pathways.

Table 14

Themes of Critical Consciousness Development: A Systematic Thematic Analysis

Systematic Theme	Key Characteristics	Grounded Examples
Catalytic Experiences	Creates cognitive dissonances; challenges existing narratives; triggers initial questioning	Witnessing parents' economic struggles; Experiencing racism; Geographic displacement
Safe Spaces for Processing	Collective dialogue; Non-judgmental environments; peer support; allowances of ideological development	College groups; DSA chapter meetings; DSA social outings
Challenging Internalized Capitalism	Dismantling individual blame; systemic critique; collective analysis	Recognizing systemic inequality; Questioning meritocracy; Inspiration from progressive politicians (“Bernie,” “AOC”)
Relational Organizing	Critical pedagogy centered on member experiences; Dialogic approach	Validating individual journeys; Connecting personal experiences to broader systems; Incremental engagement
Identity Integration	Intersectional analysis; centering diverse experiences; challenging reductive approaches	Critiques of racism; Gender-based organizing;

		Contextualizing experiences of oppression
Praxis Pathways	Local political engagement; Coalition building; Leadership development	Organizing around local issues; Specific project collaborations; Campus organizing efforts
Barriers to Sustained Consciousness	Organizational limitations; hierarchical practices; geographic inaccessibility	Scripted meetings; Leadership burnout; Limited meeting locations

These themes directly address the research questions by illuminating the conditions that promote the emergence and sustainability of critical consciousness and the processes through which organizations challenge internalized oppressive beliefs. The findings suggest that critical consciousness emerges through catalytic experiences that create cognitive dissonance, develops within safe spaces that allow collective processing of contradictions, and sustains itself through relational organizing practices that embody critical pedagogy principles.

The findings reveal that anti-oppressive organizations most effectively challenge internalized beliefs when they provide both intellectual frameworks for understanding systemic oppression and emotional connections to concrete experiences that contradict dominant narratives. The transition from systemic critique to transformative action occurs through concrete entry points to organizing, coalition-building around specific projects, leadership development opportunities, and sustainability practices.

However, the findings also identify significant barriers to sustained critical consciousness, including geographic inaccessibility, hierarchical organizational practices, leadership burnout, and social dynamics that contradict anti-oppressive values. These barriers

suggest the importance of organizational practices aligning with stated anti-oppressive values to effectively foster critical consciousness development.

Through these findings, the study provides insight into how anti-oppressive social movement organizations can effectively promote critical consciousness among their members and facilitate the challenging of internalized oppressive beliefs. The study underscores the importance of relational organizing approaches that create multiple pathways to engagement based on diverse motivations and interests rather than demanding ideological uniformity, while also emphasizing the need for organizational practices to embody the very values they seek to advance in society.

Conceptual Model: Critical Consciousness Development

Following Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis process, the study developed a conceptual model that integrates the themes identified above. This model illustrates the dynamic process of critical consciousness development within anti-oppressive social movement organizations.

The model consists of four interconnected components:

1. **Catalytic Foundations:** Critical consciousness development begins with catalytic experiences that create cognitive dissonance between lived experiences and dominant narratives. These catalytic experiences—whether witnessing economic injustice, experiencing racism, or moving between different social contexts—create openings for questioning internalized beliefs about capitalism, racism, individualism, and other oppressive systems.

2. **Supportive Environments:** The development of critical consciousness requires supportive environments where contradictions can be processed collectively. These environments function most effectively when they employ relational organizing approaches that center dialogue, connection to lived experience, and incremental development rather than didactic instruction or ideological gatekeeping.
3. **Identity-Integrated Analysis:** Sustainable critical consciousness integrates identity-based understanding with systemic critique rather than subordinating identity to class analysis. This integration recognizes how different aspects of identity shape experiences of oppression and approaches to resistance, creating more nuanced and effective critical analysis.
4. **Praxis Pathways:** Critical consciousness must be channeled into concrete action to remain vital and sustainable. Effective praxis pathways include local political engagement, coalition-building around specific projects, leadership development opportunities, and sustainability practices that prevent burnout.

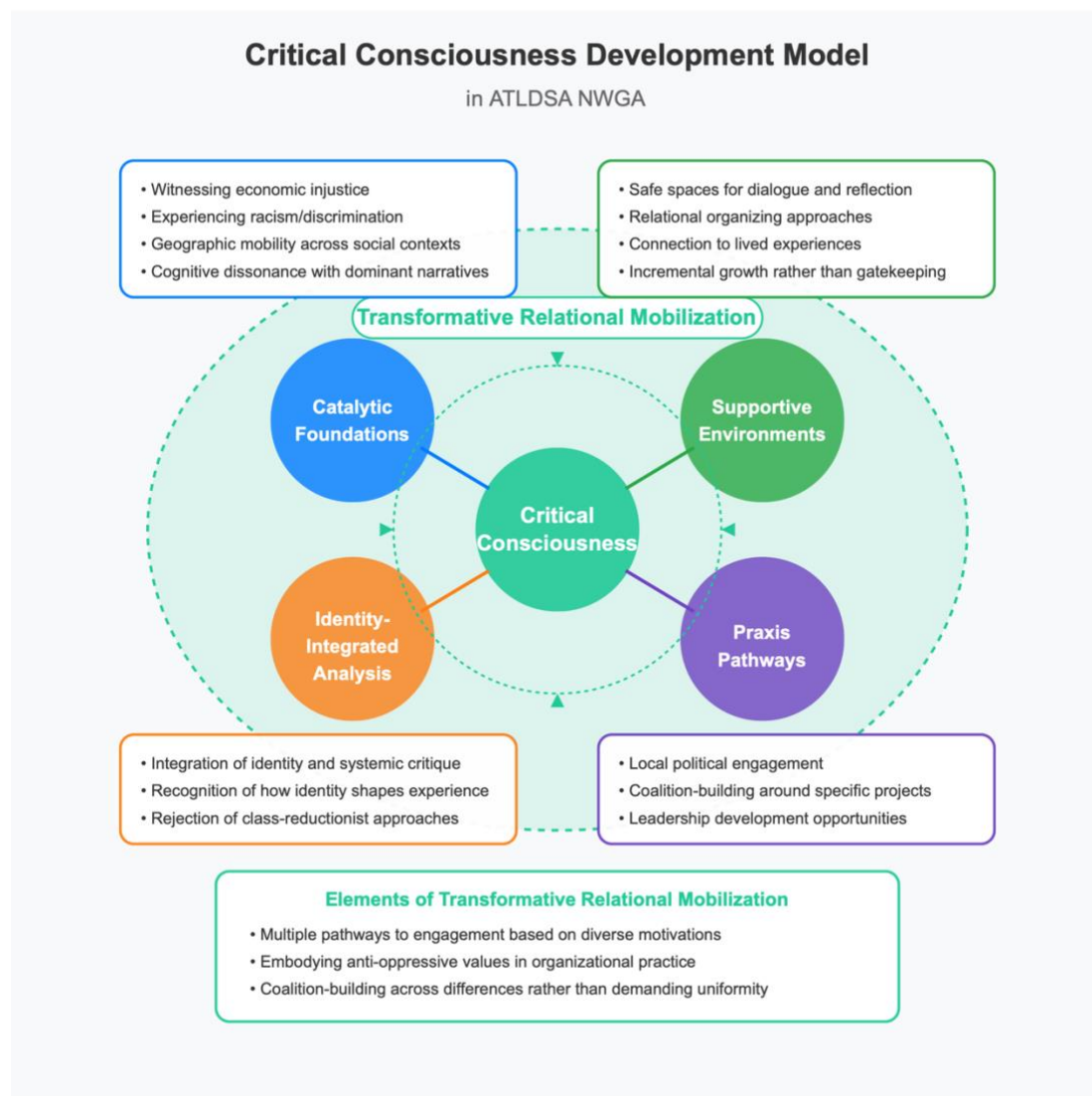


Figure 2

Critical Consciousness Development Model

This conceptual model contributes to the understanding of how anti-oppressive social movement organizations can effectively foster critical consciousness among their members and facilitate the dismantling of internalized oppressive beliefs, addressing the study's research

questions directly. This model highlights critical consciousness not as a static achievement but as an ongoing process that requires continuous cultivation through organizational practices that embody the very values they seek to advance in society.

Summary

This chapter presents the study's findings, beginning with participant demographics and detailed Individual Consciousness Pathways (ICPs) for each of the ten participants. These narratives trace diverse journeys toward critical consciousness, ranging from first-generation immigrants confronting downward mobility to individuals transitioning from conservative backgrounds to socialist organizing. The systematic thematic analysis identifies seven key themes: (1) Catalytic Experiences for Critical Consciousness, which create cognitive dissonance; (2) Safe Spaces for Processing Contradictions, where emerging awareness can be explored; (3) Challenging Internalized Capitalism and Individualism through alternative frameworks; (4) Relational Organizing as Critical Pedagogy, focusing on dialogue and incremental growth; (5) Identity Integration in Critical Consciousness Development, connecting personal experience to systemic analysis; (6) Praxis Pathways, establishing pathways for engagement; and (7) Barriers to Sustained Critical Consciousness, including organizational contradictions. The chapter culminates in a conceptual model illustrating the dynamic process of critical consciousness development within anti-oppressive organizations. The discussion chapter that follows will situate these findings within broader theoretical contexts and explore their implications for social work education, practice, and social movement organizing.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the study's research, as well as its findings on critical consciousness development within anti-oppressive social movement organizations, specifically within the Northwest Georgia branch of the Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America Chapter (ATLDSA NWGA). The study explored the conditions that promote the emergence and sustainability of critical consciousness and how these organizations challenge internalized oppressive beliefs. The discussion examines implications for social work education, practice, and research, as well as for social movement theory and organizing.

Study Limitations

This section critically examines the methodological limitations of this research on critical consciousness development within the Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America's Northwest Georgia Branch (ATLDSA NWGA) and discusses strategies employed to address these constraints.

Sample Size and Representativeness

A primary limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size of ten participants. While this allowed for in-depth exploration of individual experiences, it potentially limits the generalizability of findings to broader social movement contexts. Additionally, although the sample included diversity in terms of race, gender, and length of involvement, it may not fully

represent the complete demographic spectrum of ATLDSA NWGA membership. To mitigate these limitations, the study employed purposive sampling to ensure participants represented diverse backgrounds and experiences within the organization. The inclusion of participants with varying levels of involvement (from six months to four years) and different roles (from regular attendees to leadership) strengthened the study's ability to capture a range of perspectives despite the sample size constraints.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher's own political perspectives and potential connections to democratic socialist organizing may have influenced data collection and analysis. This positionality could have created unintentional bias in question framing during interviews or interpretation of responses during analysis. To address this limitation, the study incorporated reflexivity practices throughout the research process. The systematic application of Naeem et al.'s (2023) six-step thematic analysis framework provided methodological rigor that helped counterbalance potential bias. Additionally, member checking was employed, where preliminary findings were shared with participants to verify that their experiences were accurately represented in the analysis.

Single Organization Focus

The study's examination of a single chapter of one organization (ATLDSA NWGA) potentially limits understanding of how critical consciousness development might differ across varied organizational contexts or political orientations. This narrow focus may constrain the transferability of findings to other social movement organizations. This limitation was partly addressed through contextualization of findings within broader social movement literature,

allowing for theoretical connections beyond the specific case. The research also intentionally compared participants' experiences in ATLDSA NWGA with their prior involvement in other political or community organizations, creating points of comparison that enhanced analytical depth despite the single-organization focus.

Retrospective Self-Reporting

The study relied heavily on participants' retrospective accounts of their political development and experiences within ATLDSA NWGA. Such self-reporting is subject to recall bias, narrative smoothing, and social desirability effects where participants might reshape their stories to appear more politically consistent or sophisticated. To mitigate these concerns, interview protocols incorporated techniques to elicit specific examples rather than general claims and included questions that approached similar topics from multiple angles. The analysis also paid particular attention to tensions and contradictions within participants' narratives, treating these not as reliability problems but as data points that revealed the complex, non-linear nature of consciousness development.

Temporal Constraints

The cross-sectional design of this study captured participants' experiences at a single point in time, potentially missing how consciousness development processes might evolve over longer periods. Critical consciousness formation is an ongoing process that may require longitudinal approaches to fully comprehend. While acknowledging this limitation, the research design partially addressed temporal constraints by explicitly asking participants to describe their political development trajectories over time and by including members with varied lengths of

involvement in the organization. This approach created a composite picture of developmental processes across different stages, even without longitudinal data from the same individuals.

Reliance on Individual Interviews

This study's exclusive reliance on individual interviews as the primary data collection method represents both a deliberate methodological choice and a potential limitation. While focus groups might have provided an additional layer of data by capturing collective meaning-making processes (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013), this study privileged depth of individual experience over the breadth of collective perspective. This decision was guided by Morgan's (2012) observation that focus groups can inadvertently reproduce existing power hierarchies and lead to self-censorship, particularly when discussing sensitive topics like political development or organizational critiques. As Hydén and Bülow (2003) note, "in focus groups, there is always a risk that the group will develop norms about what can and cannot be said" (p. 306), which could have limited participants' willingness to share contradictory experiences or critiques of the organization. Given that identifying organizational contradictions emerged as a significant finding, individual interviews provided a safer space for participants to articulate these tensions.

The methodological choice to forego focus groups aligns with what Levine and Scollon (2004) describe as the necessary "trade-offs between breadth and depth" (p. 97) in qualitative research design. While this approach enhanced the detailed exploration of individual consciousness pathways, it necessarily limited the study's ability to observe the interactive processes through which critical consciousness develops collectively within the organization. As

Wilkinson (1998) argues, focus groups can reveal "the co-construction of meaning through the interactive nature of the group" (p. 187), providing insight into how individuals collectively negotiate understanding of concepts like socialism or anti-racism. Future research might productively employ multi-method approaches to capture both the depth of individual experience and the dynamics of collective meaning-making, as suggested by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018).

The decision to employ member checking through infographic validation rather than focus group validation represents an effort to mitigate this limitation while maintaining methodological consistency. This approach aligns with Tracy's (2010) "big tent" criteria for qualitative excellence, which recognizes multiple paths to research quality beyond traditional triangulation. As Birt et al. (2016) note, member checking can serve as "a way of finding out whether the data analysis has resulted in a story participants find credible" (p. 1804) without requiring additional data collection methods that might introduce incompatible epistemological assumptions. While this approach strengthened the trustworthiness of individual accounts, it did not capture the dynamic interplay between individual and collective consciousness that focus groups might have revealed. This limitation suggests opportunities for future research employing complementary methodologies to further develop understanding of how critical consciousness emerges at the intersection of individual experience and collective engagement.

Methodological Strengths

Despite these limitations, the study's application of Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis framework strengthened methodological rigor in several ways. The six-step process, from transcript creation and data familiarization to conceptual model development

provided a transparent analytical procedure that enhanced trustworthiness. The framework's emphasis on keyword selection (using the 6Rs approach) and systematic coding (through additional 6Rs) helped ensure that themes were firmly grounded in participants' actual language and experiences rather than imposed by researcher preconceptions.

Additionally, the study's focus on both conditions and processes of consciousness development offered practical insights for organizational practice despite sample limitations. By examining not just what critical consciousness looks like but how it emerges within specific organizational contexts, the research provides valuable knowledge for social movement organizations seeking to enhance their consciousness-raising efforts.

Overall, while acknowledging these limitations, the study's methodological approach, diversity within the sample, and analytical depth provide valuable insights into critical consciousness development processes. Future research could address these limitations through larger samples across multiple organizations, longitudinal designs, and mixed-methods approaches that incorporate observational data alongside interviews.

Understanding Critical Consciousness Development

The findings from this study reveal critical consciousness development as a dynamic process that involves catalytic experiences, supportive environments, challenging internalized beliefs, and pathways to action. This process aligns with Paulo Freire's (2000) concept of *conscientização* but extends it by highlighting the specific conditions that foster critical consciousness in contemporary social movement contexts.

Discussion of ICP Themes

Catalytic Experiences as Foundation for Transformation

The research identified various catalytic experiences that initiated critical consciousness development among participants. For first-generation immigrant participants, witnessing their parents' downward mobility despite education and hard work challenged fundamental beliefs about meritocracy: "My dad ended up working as a valet for 20 something years... because the US didn't respect the degree that he got." These contradictions created openings for questioning internalized beliefs about capitalism and individualism. For Black participants, direct or observed experiences of racism created early awareness of systemic injustice. Geographic displacement emerged as another significant catalyst, particularly for participants who moved between different regions of the country and experienced stark contrasts in racial dynamics.

These findings echo Sharon Nepstad's (2007) concept of "cognitive liberation," a social-psychological state where individuals recognize systems as unjust, begin to demand change, and come to believe in their capacity to alter their circumstances. These catalytic experiences also resonate with what bell hooks (1994) describes as "confrontational moments" that disrupt dominant narratives and create openings for new understanding. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks argues that education as a practice of freedom begins with confronting "the pain of interrogating biases" (p. 43) that have been normalized through dominant ideologies.

Politi et al. (2022) identify two parallel pathways to collective action: one through collective identification with similarly positioned groups and another through politicized identification with organized political actors. These pathways help explain how ATLDSA

NWGA members developed political consciousness, some through recognition of shared experiences with marginalized communities, others through exposure to organized political frameworks. As Politi et al. note, "the reappraisal of collective disadvantage in terms of perceived group-based injustice is closely tied up with the level of collective identification with the subordinated group" (p. 611).

This process mirrors Bhatia's (2023) findings on the development of a "radical habitus" among Bahraini activists, where "political radicalization was in many ways rooted in and counter to the deep oppression that each experienced as children and young adults" (p. 163). For ATLDSA NWGA members, early exposure to injustice—whether through family experiences, personal encounters with discrimination, or witnessing inequality—created predispositions toward critical analysis that later matured into socialist consciousness.

Neville and Martin's (2023) concept of "slow justice" provides a valuable framework for understanding how catalytic experiences unfold over time. Just as environmental justice operates through "dispersed, delayed, and cumulative processes" (p. 193), critical consciousness similarly develops through what may initially appear as discrete moments but accumulate significance over time. This temporal dimension helps explain why many ATLDSA NWGA members described their political journeys as involving multiple catalytic moments rather than singular transformative events.

This perspective aligns with Crossley's (2003) understanding of the "radical habitus" as both a "structured structure" formed through involvement in activism and a "structuring structure" that leads activists to continue in activism (cited in Bhatia, 2023, p. 576). The catalytic experiences that initiate critical consciousness create predispositions that make subsequent

political engagement more likely, creating what Woods et al. (2012) describe as a "ladder of emotions" in political mobilization.

Zamponi's (2024) analysis of mutual aid during COVID-19 further illuminates how temporal contexts shape political activation. He notes that "the temporality of emergency completely restructured most people's schedules. Suspending everyday life created the conditions for reflection" (p. 763). Similarly, ATLDSA NWGA members often described how disruptions to normal life, whether through personal crises or broader social emergencies, created openings for political reflection and engagement. Neville and Martin's (2023) three-part typology of relational pathways (people, projects, and processes) offers a framework for understanding how catalytic experiences operate through multiple dimensions. Their focus on "social ties and networks" (p. 197) helps explain how ATLDSA NWGA members' political development was often mediated through relationships with mentors, friends, or fellow activists who helped them process catalytic experiences.

This aligns with Press's (2012) research on Kenyan activists, where family experiences of repression created "moments of revelatory disjuncture" (p. 450) that challenged previous political understandings. For many ATLDSA NWGA members, family histories of activism or resistance created important foundations for later political development.

Similarly, Neville and Martin's (2023) concept of "material connections" resonates with how place-based experiences served as catalytic moments. As they note, "place-based grievances can arise in specific places when development projects disrupt a sense of belonging" (p. 197). For many participants, experiencing or witnessing spatial inequalities created powerful catalytic moments that challenged their previous understanding of society, similar to how Rodrigues and

Prado (2013) document the importance of place-based experiences in the development of Brazilian Black feminist consciousness.

Collective Action as Both Outcome and Catalyst

The literature reveals how collective action functions not just as an outcome of political consciousness but as a catalyst for its further development. Zamponi (2024) describes how participation in mutual aid initiatives during COVID-19 created "the opportunity to access different spheres of social reality" (p. 765), helping participants develop deeper understanding of structural issues. Similarly, ATLDSA NWGA members described how participation in protests, mutual aid, and organizing efforts served as catalytic experiences that transformed their political understanding.

As Politi et al. (2022) note, both perceived group-based injustice and collective efficacy are crucial for sustaining collective action. For ATLDSA NWGA members, catalytic experiences often involved both: recognizing systemic injustice and experiencing the power of collective response. This dual process created what Henry Giroux (2011) describes as "ruptures, shifts, and tensions" (p. 76) in how individuals understand themselves and their world, opening possibilities for sustained political engagement.

This perspective extends Nepstad's (2007) concept of "cognitive liberation" by emphasizing how liberation occurs not just cognitively but through embodied experiences and relational connections. The catalytic moments described by ATLDSA NWGA members thus represent what might be called "slow radicalization," a process that unfolds through interconnected pathways that may only become visible when viewed across extended temporal

and spatial scales. As Wagner (2005) notes, "any transformation in thinking necessarily entails a risk as one tries out new approaches and tests new beliefs and frameworks of understanding" (p. 263). The catalytic experiences that initiate critical consciousness create precisely such moments of risk and possibility, unsettling dominant ways of thinking and opening pathways toward new forms of political understanding and engagement.

What emerges from this integrated analysis is a view of catalytic experiences as multidimensional processes operating across temporal, social, and material dimensions. Rather than isolated moments of revelation, these experiences represent complex encounters that transform understanding through interconnected pathways of personal experience, collective identity, social relationships, and engagement with material conditions.

Supportive Environments for Counterhegemonic Critique

The study findings about ATLDSA NWGA as a safe space for processing contradictions and developing critical consciousness connects strongly with broader theoretical frameworks about how counterspaces function in social movements and political development. These supportive environments play a crucial role in fostering the development of critical consciousness while providing essential emotional support for individuals challenging dominant ideologies.

The importance of safe spaces described in the original passage aligns with what Törnberg and Törnberg (2017) identify as "free social spaces," which they define as "small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or

accompanies political mobilization" (p. 183). These spaces create protective shelters against prevailing hegemonic ideologies while simultaneously serving as hubs for the diffusion of alternative ideas.

This concept resonates deeply with Krinsky's (2008) analysis of cognitive systems and strategic change in contentious politics. Krinsky argues that cognition is better understood as a property of cognitive systems rather than solely as an intra-cranial process of individual consciousness. For Krinsky, these cognitive systems contain "critical elements for the process of cognition and for that which is cogitated, and include both material and social, as well as ideational elements" (p. 2). The supportive environments created by organizations like ATLDSA NWGA function as these cognitive systems, providing the material, social, and ideational resources needed for members to develop critical consciousness.

Krinsky's (2008) cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) provides a particularly useful framework for understanding how ATLDSA NWGA functions as a supportive environment. CHAT conceptualizes cognitive activity within a broader system structured by "subjects motivated by goals or objects; mediating artifacts or tools; institutional rules and genres of discourse; relevant communities; and divisions of labor within those communities" (p. 3). This helps explain why ATLDSA NWGA's effectiveness as a safe space varied based on organizational practices—these practices constitute the rules, tools, and division of labor that structure the cognitive activity system.

When ATLDSA NWGA created non-judgmental environments where ideological development was not rushed, they were effectively addressing what Krinsky calls the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), or the difference between what someone can do with help versus

what they can do alone. As Krinsky explains, "the key to the ZPD is that it expands the range of activity in which the subject can engage" (p. 5). By providing supportive environments, ATLDSA NWGA expands the range of critical thinking members can engage in, allowing them to process contradictions they might not be able to navigate alone.

Abers' (2021) work on institutional activism provides additional insights into how supportive environments function across different contexts. While Abers (2021) focuses on activism inside state institutions, her emphasis on the importance of networks and ties based on trust resonates with the dynamics of ATLDSA NWGA. She defines institutional activism as "collective action in the defense of contentious causes conducted within the boundaries of state institutions" (p. 331), but her analysis of how activists navigate institutional constraints has broader applications. Abers' (2021) attention to "the ways those locations both led actors to engage in different kinds of strategies and influenced the way those strategies changed as political conditions became increasingly hostile" (p. 332) helps explain why ATLDSA NWGA's effectiveness as a supportive environment varied under different conditions. When political conditions became more challenging, the organization needed to adapt its strategies for creating safe spaces while maintaining its commitment to developing critical consciousness.

The concept of "knowledge spaces" that Abers (2021) draws from offers a rich framework for understanding how ATLDSA NWGA creates supportive environments. Abers (2021) describes knowledge spaces as emerging from "motleys that link people, practices and places: an 'amalgam of places, bodies, voices, skills, practices, technical devices, theories, social strategies and collective work'" (p. 334). This helps explain why effective supportive

environments in ATLDSA NWGA integrate multiple elements, including physical meeting spaces, organizational practices, ideological resources, and relational connections.

Emotional Topologies and Critical Consciousness

Wright et al.'s (2022) concept of "emotional topologies" adds another dimension to the study's conceptualization of supportive environments for counterhegemonic critique. They argue that knowledge spaces have "form: connections, ridges, troughs, contours that may twist, crumple, re-form and re-configure, under conditions of both repetition and difference" (p. 567). The wide diversity of components in a knowledge space where people, techniques, affects, equipment, stories, and knowings are linked through heterogeneous interactions.

This topology metaphor helps explain why ATLDSA NWGA members valued non-judgmental environments where ideological development wasn't rushed. Developing critical consciousness involves navigating emotional topologies, where "emotions reveal their relationality, the ways they circulate and resonate" (p. 568). The emotional dimension of challenging internalized capitalism requires spaces where these emotions can be processed collectively.

As Wright et al. (2022) note, "emotions are understood as fundamental to the ways the world is lived and experienced; they are generative of, and generated through, human and, indeed, more-than-human relationships" (p. 564). For ATLDSA NWGA members challenging internalized capitalist beliefs, emotions like guilt, shame, and hope are not merely personal reactions but part of the collective process of developing critical consciousness.

Spaces of Refuge

Milan's (2025) work on refugee solidarity activism offers insights into how the spatial dimension of supportive environments affects their functioning. Milan combines "a spatial and relational perspective to the study of solidarity activism" (p. 819) and finds that solidarity groups continued their activities during the pandemic due to "the existence of established networks and strong ties between international and domestic actors; and the spatiality of the border, which provided fertile ground for these relationships and ties to develop and thrive" (p. 819). This spatial analysis helps explain why certain ATLDSA NWGA spaces were more effective for processing contradictions than others. The physical and social organization of these spaces, whether they were intimate small groups, larger assemblies, or one-on-one conversations, affected how members could engage with contradictions and develop critical consciousness.

Milan's (2025) emphasis on "the ways in which the spatiality of the border shapes and is shaped by interactions and relationships between people, groups and institutions" (p. 821) offers a framework for understanding how ATLDSA NWGA's supportive environments both shape and are shaped by the interactions they host. When members process contradictions within these spaces, they are not only developing their own critical consciousness but also reshaping the space itself, creating new possibilities for future interactions.

Feeling Sociopolitical Issues "to the Bone"

Wright et al.'s (2022) analysis of how Filipino activists "feel climate change to the bone" (p. 561) offers a powerful metaphor for understanding the deeply embodied nature of critical consciousness development. Just as climate activists experience climate change through "complex knowings of climate and the intimate hurts of disaster" (p. 561), ATLDSA NWGA

members develop critical consciousness through complex knowings of capitalism and the intimate hurts of economic exploitation.

Wright et al. (2022) argue that "knowledges [are] affective, emotional and relational, and deeply imbued with power relations" (p. 561). This helps explain why supportive environments are so crucial for critical consciousness development, because they provide spaces where these affective, emotional, and relational dimensions can be explored and processed collectively.

The concept of "knowing climate change to the bone" resonates with how ATLDSA NWGA members described their growing awareness of capitalism's effects. As one participant noted, "the Bernie campaign made me realize, like, it's not my fault that I'm poor. I'm poor because of greedy corporations in greedy capitalists and the class system we live under." This represents a shift from abstract intellectual understanding to embodied knowing—feeling capitalism's effects "to the bone."

As reflected by social movement studies literature, this analysis reveals those supportive environments for counterhegemonic critique function as essential infrastructure for both personal and collective transformation. Drawing on Krinsky's (2008) CHAT framework, we can understand these environments as activity systems that distribute cognition among subjects, communities, tools, and rules. Abers' (2021) attention to knowledge spaces and situated agency helps explain how these environments enable creative action despite structural constraints. Wright et al.'s (2022) emotional topologies illuminate the affective dimensions of critical consciousness development, while Milan's (2025) spatial analysis highlights how these environments are shaped by and shape interactions.

For members of ATLD SA NWGA, these supportive environments enabled them to process contradictions and develop critical consciousness by providing what Krinsky calls "scaffolding" for their cognitive development. The effectiveness of these spaces depended on organizational practices that created non-judgmental environments where ideological development wasn't rushed, practices that addressed what Wright et al. (2022) call the "emotional topologies" of knowledge development.

This analysis suggests that organizations seeking to develop critical consciousness must intentionally create and maintain these supportive environments, recognizing them not as peripheral to political work but as central to developing the critical consciousness needed for effective collective action. As Krinsky (2008) concludes, "by laying bare some of the mechanics of knowledge production" (p. 24), these environments create opportunities for resistance and change.

Negotiating Identity in Consciousness Development and Social Movement Mobilization

The importance of integrating identity-based understanding with systemic critique for sustained critical consciousness emerged as a significant finding in this research. Participants explicitly argued against class-reductionist approaches, with one stating: "To me, it's that kind of class first analysis that washes away identity... identity is important because it grounds you in why you do certain things." These findings align with bell hooks' (1994) concept of "engaged pedagogy," which "does not seek simply to empower students... [but] is rooted in a desire to provide students with an education that transgresses cultural, sexual, and racial boundaries" (p. 13). Similarly, McLaren (2006) argues for a "critical multiculturalism" that recognizes the specificity of different forms of oppression while also identifying their interconnections within

global capitalism. Giroux (2005) further emphasizes the importance of "border pedagogy" that enables students to "engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages" (p. 20).

Recent social movement research provides empirical support for the critical importance of identity in movement formation and mobilization. Politi et al.'s (2022) research on precarious workers in Italy identifies dual pathways through which collective action intentions develop. Their findings reveal that "participants exhibited high collective action intentions when they were able to collectively identify with other precarious workers as part of the same social group" (p. 609). This collective identification increased perceived group-based injustice, which predicted collective action intentions. They also found a second pathway: "participants also exhibited high collective action intentions when they were able to politically identify with unionized workers" (p. 609). This politicized identification increased collective efficacy, which in turn predicted action intentions.

This dual-pathway model offers a sophisticated understanding of how identity operates in movements, suggesting that both collective group identity and politicized identity are essential for mobilization. The participants who noted that identity grounds their actions are articulating precisely what Politi et al. (2022) empirically validated: identity provides the foundation for both perceiving injustice and developing collective efficacy.

Castellanos' (2019) study of the LGBT movement in the Dominican Republic reveals how the focus on HIV/AIDS shaped the movement's identity and strategy in ways that sometimes excluded lesbian concerns. As Castellanos notes, "While creating political opportunities, international HIV/AIDS funding also consolidated the social movement around

HIV at the expense of other issues" (p. 963). One lesbian activist articulated this tension: "As we focus our actions around gay men's main issue, HIV, the fundamental issues impacting women, particularly lesbians, are relegated to second place" (p. 970). These findings highlight the dangers of approaches that privilege certain aspects of identity over others.

The historical tension between identity politics and class politics provides important context for understanding contemporary movement challenges. Payling's (2017) historical analysis of sexual politics and urban left movements in 1980s Sheffield observed that "Sheffield's labour movement avoided involvement with gay politics" despite limited support for workplace campaigns (p. 258). Payling notes that in working-class communities, there was "a tolerance of gay people... as long as it was a quiet, unarticulated homosexuality" (p. 266). This historical context helps explain continuing tensions in organizations like DSA that emerge from labor movement traditions.

The transformation from individual to collective identity through movement participation represents another crucial dimension of identity development. Zamponi's (2023) study of mutual aid initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy reveals that "the recruitment of volunteers ended up joining the collective actors as fully fledged activists, significantly changing the composition of the former" (p. 767). A social center activist described this transformation: "Doing politics with those we in militant circles define as 'normal people' was good for me. This barrier has fallen a little for me, because these are exactly the people who are now part of my assembly" (p. 767).

This demonstrates how individual identity can transform through participation in collective action—a process participants also described in their critical consciousness

development. Zamponi identifies this as "slow justice," where relationships formed during crisis response create lasting social change beyond the immediate context. This temporal dimension shows how identities evolve through engagement with others in collective action.

Coalition building across different identity groups presents both challenges and opportunities for movements. Polanska and Piotrowski's (2015) study of squatters and tenants' movements in Poland reveals that coalitions between different movements often require negotiating complex identity differences while finding common ground for action. They observe that "identity alignment among the squatters and other social actors in the city affected the need of such interactions and the openness towards new allies" (p. 292). Importantly, they challenge the conventional view that high levels of identity alignment facilitate coalition-building, arguing instead that "a high degree of identity alignment and ideological consistency discourages formation of new alliances" (p. 292). This suggests that some degree of identity differentiation might actually facilitate broader movement building.

The historical context of movement formation significantly shapes identity development in social movements. Navrátil's (2023) study of anti-war campaigns in the Czech Republic describes how "broadening collective identity and creating instrumental relationships in times with the opening of political opportunities is followed by the institutionalisation and further expansion of protest cooperation during a period of heightened political threats" (p. 519). This suggests that identity integration is not a static achievement but an ongoing process responding to changing political contexts.

Neville and Martin's (2023) framework for tracing "slow justice" offers valuable insights about how identity connections persist across time and space in social movements. They identify

"people" as one of three key pathways through which movements diffuse: "Social relations can be traced through individuals who take on symbolic significance, groups who forge shared identities, and networks of organizations that carry institutional memory and historical knowledge" (p. 197). This historical perspective suggests that identity-based consciousness is not only about present-day recognition but also about connecting to historical legacies of resistance.

Educational approaches to identity development must address the dynamic interplay between individual and structural factors. Sjøen's (2024) analysis of preventing violent extremism in education highlights the dangers of individualizing approaches that fail to account for identity dynamics. He notes that "the dominant mode of preventing extremism is through therapeutic strategies aimed at helping vulnerable individuals becoming resilient to extreme ideologies" (p. 217). This individualistic approach overlooks "the role of social mechanisms including the reciprocal interplay between structural, social and individual factors" (p. 217). Critical pedagogy must therefore move beyond individual-level interventions to address how identity formations are shaped by social relationships and structural forces.

This integrated approach to identity offers a path forward for critical pedagogy that avoids both class reductionism and identity reductionism, instead recognizing the complex interplay between various aspects of identity in fostering critical consciousness and movement participation. These insights echo Duhaney and El-Lahib's (2021) critique of "the politics of resistance" that fails to acknowledge the differential impact of oppression based on various identities, and Jeffery's (2005) discussion of the "race to innocence" - where individuals respond to challenges about their dominance by drawing attention to their own subordination. Through a more nuanced understanding of identity in movement contexts, critical pedagogy can better

prepare participants to engage in the complex work of building inclusive movements for social change.

From Analysis to Action: Building Praxis Pathways in Social Movements

The journey from critical consciousness to engaged transformative action represents one of the most significant challenges in social movement mobilization. While many participants develop sophisticated analyses of systemic issues, translating this understanding into concrete action requires specific pathways and support structures. The findings from this project illuminate how social movements can effectively bridge this gap between critique and action.

Freire's (1970/2000) concept of "praxis" provides a theoretical framework for understanding this movement from analysis to action. He argues that authentic liberation requires both reflection and action: "When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism... When a word is deprived of its dimension of reflection, action becomes activism" (p. 87). True praxis involves a dialectical relationship between reflection and action, theory and practice.

This dialectical relationship is evident in Jung and Yoo's (2023) analysis of agroecological movements in Thailand, where they identify what they call "cognitive praxis" as central to the movement's success. They describe cognitive praxis as "the 'knowledge-production activity' arising in social movements and understood as 'the way human consciousness is acted out or put into practice'" (p. 1190). Through this process, farmers not only critique industrial agricultural practices but also develop and implement alternative approaches based on ecological principles.

Similarly, Stewart and Breeden (2021) highlight how Black women engage in an ongoing dialectic between resistance and activism in fat liberation movements. They emphasize that "resistance can also be everyday acts of eluding the consequences of oppression" (p. 223) and that these everyday forms of resistance often lay the groundwork for more organized activism. This perspective challenges us to recognize how seemingly personal acts of self-preservation can constitute meaningful political praxis when situated within broader contexts of oppression.

Building Coalition Pathways

Coalition-building around specific projects emerged as another crucial pathway facilitating movement from analysis to action. Successful coalitions provide structures for collaborative action while creating opportunities for leadership development through incremental responsibility. Some participants emphasized the importance of pragmatic approaches to power while maintaining transformative visions: "We can't, we can't detach ourselves from the political process. Because when we detach from existing power structures, that's when we really lose" (SB0F).

Dempsey et al. (2011) provide a compelling framework for understanding coalition-building through their concept of "counter-space," which they define as "a process whereby groups create temporary and partial milieus to communicate and enact oppositional politics" (p. 205). They observe how transnational feminist networks create these counter-spaces as "intentional spaces to 'engage difference'" that inform "network participants of the multiple forms of oppression that women are facing within a broader transnational context" (p. 216). These spaces facilitate both critical analysis and coordinated action by creating opportunities for knowledge exchange across geographical and cultural boundaries. Jung and Yoo (2023) similarly

document how the creation of organic farmers' markets in Thailand provided not just economic opportunities but also "a mechanism for establishing a network of farmers, consumers, and civil society groups" (p. 1195) that could tackle rural problems collectively. These markets became sites for knowledge exchange and solidarity-building that enabled more effective political action.

Person-to-Person Contact and Embodied Experience

The progression from analysis to action is often facilitated by direct personal encounters that make abstract issues concrete. Nepstad's (2007) analysis of how individuals progress through the stages of cognitive liberation to become activists identifies "person-to-person contact" as a key motivator that helps individuals move from awareness to action. In the Central America peace movement, direct encounters with affected individuals "not only gave a human face to the issue but also confirmed the target for action" (p. 482). Similarly, Dempsey et al. (2011) highlight the importance of face-to-face interactions in transnational feminist organizing, noting that when "personal histories [are] shared face-to-face," they "illuminate how Islam is experienced across space and scale. In this way, feminist counter-spaces make possible a more nuanced understanding of potentially polarizing differences" (p. 214). These direct encounters help activists develop more sophisticated analyses that can inform effective action strategies.

In the same vein, Jung and Yoo (2023) observe how direct interactions at organic farmers' markets facilitated learning and political engagement: "When the market is open, farmers from different districts in Chiang Mai province have the opportunity to talk naturally about each other's produce, farming techniques, and new agricultural information" (p. 1198). These casual interactions built social capital and shared knowledge that supported collective action.

The findings from contemporary social movement and critical consciousness research, both conceptually and empirically, confirm and extend the observations from the study. Effective social movements must create structured pathways that help participants translate critical consciousness into sustained action. These pathways include connecting abstract critiques to concrete local issues, building coalitions around specific projects, and appropriately anchoring identity in dialogue exploring social reality. Additionally, successful movements foster pragmatic approaches to engaging with power while creating opportunities for direct person-to-person contact with affected communities. Cultivating "bridge builders" who can connect different movement spaces has also proven essential. By intentionally constructing cognitive spaces and counter-spaces where alternative knowledge and practices can flourish, movements create environments that nurture both critical analysis and transformative action. Through these deliberate efforts to build praxis pathways, social movements can more effectively help participants move from analysis to action, creating sustainable engagement that addresses both immediate injustices and long-term systemic change.

Implications

Implications for Social Work Education

The findings from this study have significant implications for social work education, suggesting several ways in which educational programs can better foster critical consciousness among students. By understanding the conditions that promote critical consciousness and the barriers that impede it, educators can develop more effective approaches to preparing future social workers for anti-oppressive practice that is currently lacking in contemporary social work pedagogy (Olcoñ et al., 2018). The integration of critical consciousness frameworks into

curriculum design could transform how students conceptualize and respond to social injustice across multiple systems.

Integrating Catalytic Learning Experiences

Social work education should incorporate structured catalytic experiences that help students recognize contradictions between dominant narratives and lived realities. These might include immersive community experiences, dialogues with affected communities, or critical analysis of how policies impact different populations. Such experiences create the cognitive dissonance necessary for critical consciousness development. For example, field placements could be intentionally designed to expose students to the contradictions between agency missions and structural constraints. Classroom assignments could require students to analyze how their personal experiences connect to broader societal patterns.

Freire's (1970/2000) concept of "problem-posing education" provides a theoretical framework for designing such experiences. Problem-posing education "affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (p. 84). This approach recognizes that learning is an ongoing process of engaging with real-world contradictions rather than a one-time acquisition of knowledge. Similarly, Shor (1992) offers practical strategies for implementing problem-posing education, emphasizing the importance of "frontloading student expression" by beginning with students' experiences and concerns. He advocates for starting with "generative themes" drawn from students' lives, which are then connected to broader social issues through dialogue and research. This approach could be adapted to social work education by beginning with students' field

experiences or personal encounters with social problems, then connecting these to broader structural analyses.

Wagner (2005) advocates for similar approaches in anti-racist pedagogy, arguing that "one of the most effective means for dealing with fear... is to openly address it" (p. 263). She suggests that pedagogy should prepare students for the unsettling nature of critical consciousness development rather than trying to shield them from discomfort. Similarly, Odera et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of "embracing vulnerability" in social work education, suggesting that educators should model vulnerability and create space for students to take risks in their learning.

Creating Dialogical Learning Environments

The study's findings on the importance of safe spaces for processing contradictions suggest that social work education should prioritize dialogical learning environments where students can collectively explore emerging critical perspectives. This means moving beyond traditional lecture formats to incorporate facilitated dialogues, peer learning, and collective problem-solving. Based on the study's findings, faculty should be trained in facilitation methods that validate incremental growth and encourage students to connect personal experiences to systemic analysis. This approach aligns with Freire's critical pedagogy principles and supports the finding that critical consciousness develops through dialogue rather than didactic instruction.

Freire (1970/2000) emphasizes that dialogue is not just a teaching technique but a fundamental ethic of liberation. He argues that "dialogue cannot exist... in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people... Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself" (p. 89). This understanding of dialogue as rooted in love and respect for

others provides a foundation for creating learning environments where students can take risks and grow together. hooks (1994) extends this understanding in her concept of "engaged pedagogy," which emphasizes the importance of vulnerability and emotional engagement in learning. She argues that "to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (p. 13). This approach recognizes that critical consciousness development involves not just intellectual understanding but emotional processing of difficult realities.

Jeffery (2005) emphasizes the importance of such dialogical approaches in anti-racist social work education, arguing that "the process of learning is of critical importance and must be regarded as a legitimate part of learning. Content cannot be conveyed unless the process is first carefully developed and cultivated" (p. 263). Similarly, Wagner (2005) suggests that "significant attention" must be given to "the process of learning," or else "our best efforts will likely continue to produce uneven and often frustrating classroom experiences" (p. 268).

Challenging Dominant Frameworks

Social work education must explicitly challenge dominant frameworks that individualize social problems. This means introducing students to alternative theoretical perspectives that emphasize structural analysis, such as critical race theory, feminist theory, disability justice, and anti-colonial frameworks. Beyond merely exposing students to these perspectives, programs should integrate them throughout the curriculum rather than siloing them in specialized courses. This integration helps students develop the analytical tools to challenge internalized oppressive beliefs and recognize how different forms of oppression intersect and reinforce each other.

McLaren (2003) argues for a "critical pedagogy of resistance" that explicitly challenges dominant ideologies and equips students to recognize and resist oppressive practices. He writes, "Critical pedagogy asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not" (p. 196). This approach encourages students to question taken-for-granted assumptions about social problems and their solutions.

Giroux (2011) similarly emphasizes the importance of challenging dominant frameworks through what he calls "critical literacy." He argues that "critical literacy provides the ability to analyze the relationship between ideologies and social relations of domination while simultaneously providing the theoretical tools to mediate and engage the world in order to change it" (p. 152). This approach helps students recognize how dominant discourses shape their understanding of social problems and develop alternative frameworks for analysis and action. Duhaney and El-Lahib (2021) argue for this approach in their call to dismantle white supremacy in social work education. They note that "diversifying the social work knowledge base is necessary and must include different ways of knowing and being to actively disrupt the heteronormativity of whiteness and white supremacy" (p. 432). Similarly, Odera et al. (2021) emphasize the need to "decenter whiteness" in social work curricula, arguing that this decentering "requires constant and persistent effort" beyond simply diversifying reading lists.

Emphasizing Identity Integration

The study's findings on the importance of identity integration suggest that social work education should help students understand how different aspects of identity shape experiences of

oppression and approaches to resistance. This goes beyond superficial diversity content to engage with the specific historical, cultural, and political contexts of different identity groups.

Programs should create opportunities for students to explore how their own identities shape their worldviews and professional practices. This self-reflexive process helps future practitioners recognize their positionality and develop more nuanced approaches to working with diverse communities. hooks (1994) emphasizes the importance of identity integration in her concept of "engaged pedagogy." She argues that "any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (p. 21). This approach recognizes that identity is not fixed but constantly negotiated through interactions with others and with systems of power.

Giroux (2005) further develops this understanding in his concept of "border pedagogy," which "acknowledges the shifting borders that both undermine and reterritorialize different configurations of culture, power, and knowledge" (p. 20). This approach helps students understand how identity is constructed through historical and political processes rather than being fixed or essential. It also encourages them to develop what Giroux calls "a politics of difference" that recognizes both commonalities and specificities in experiences of oppression. Jeffery (2005) underscores the importance of this approach, noting that "teaching students to be self-reflexive and critical of whiteness, confronts enormous obstacles in a profession that defines its mandate as the practical and benevolent treatment of society's marginalized and 'unfortunate' individuals and groups" (p. 411). She argues that social work education must help students

navigate the paradox that whiteness is embedded in the profession's practices, creating tension for those who seek to challenge oppression while working within the profession.

Connecting Analysis to Action

The study's findings also support the argument that social work education should provide concrete pathways for students to move from analysis to action. This might include action-oriented assignments, community-based research projects, or partnerships with social movement organizations. Such experiences help students develop the skills and confidence to engage in transformative action. Programs should also teach students how to navigate the tensions between reform and transformation, helping them develop strategies for working within existing systems while maintaining a vision of fundamental change. This prepares graduates to engage effectively with both social service systems and social movements.

Freire (1970/2000) emphasizes that authentic education must connect reflection and action through praxis. He argues that "human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world" (p. 125). This understanding suggests that social work education should provide opportunities for students to not only analyze social problems but also engage in efforts to address them. Shor (1992) offers practical strategies for connecting analysis to action, emphasizing the importance of what he calls "participatory learning." He argues that "participatory learning is learning in which the student plays an active role... Students do more than simply receive information. They are also producers of knowledge, analyses, and solutions" (p. 122). This approach involves engaging students in research, community projects, and other forms of active learning that connect analysis to concrete change efforts.

McLaren (2015) further emphasizes that critical pedagogy must move beyond critique to transformative action. He argues that "critical pedagogy works to help students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action" (p. 8). This approach helps students develop not only critical analyses of oppression but also practical strategies for challenging it in their professional and personal lives. Su and Jagninski (2013) emphasize the importance of such "praxis pathways" in their analysis of youth development organizations. They found that "local political engagement emerged as a critical pathway from critique to action" and that "leadership development through incremental responsibility built capacity for transformative action" (p. 113). Social work education could adopt similar approaches to help students bridge the gap between theoretical critiques and practical action.

Implications for Social Work Praxis

Social work praxis represents the dynamic and recursive relationship between theory, practice, education, and action. Unlike practice alone, which may refer simply to the application of skills and techniques, praxis encompasses the intentional integration of critical reflection with concrete action toward transformation (Freire, 2000). In the social work context, praxis includes the interconnected domains of education (how social workers are trained and socialized into the profession), practice (the methods and approaches used with individuals, groups, and communities), and theory/research (the knowledge base that informs and is informed by education and practice). These domains function in a dialogical relationship, where each informs and transforms the others through critical reflection and action (Wainwright, 2022).

Critical consciousness development has significant implications for social work praxis at multiple levels. The process of developing awareness about systemic oppression and taking action against it represents a core dimension of social justice work that aligns with social work's ethical commitments. This alignment is particularly important as the profession confronts its historical complicity in systems of oppression (Brock-Petrossius et al., 2022) and works to reconstruct itself as a force for liberation. Drawing on the literature and research findings on critical consciousness, this report examines key implications for social work praxis, providing a framework for practitioners to incorporate critical consciousness approaches in their work with individuals, communities, and systems.

Reframing Individual Struggles as Systemic Issues

Social work ethics mandates that social workers should help clients recognize the structural roots of personal challenges by moving beyond individualized understandings of problems to identify systemic patterns (NASW, n.d.). This reframing process validates clients' experiences while connecting them to broader struggles for justice. For example, practitioners working with clients experiencing housing insecurity could help them understand how housing policies, gentrification, and economic inequality contribute to their situation. This approach reduces self-blame and opens possibilities for collective action rather than just individual coping. Freire's (1970/2000) concept of "conscientização" provides a theoretical framework for this practice approach. He argues that critical consciousness involves "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 35). Social workers can facilitate this process by helping clients recognize how their personal challenges connect to broader social structures.

This reframing aligns with what Tang Yan et al. (2022) describe as an essential component of critical race pedagogy in social work education: "a praxis of radical relationality and discomfort." Their autoethnographic study highlights the importance of shifting from damage-centered approaches to those that connect personal experiences to structural contexts. Similarly, Lee et al. (2023) emphasize the need for mentors to engage in critical reflexivity, acknowledging power dynamics and helping mentees develop the "skillsets for asking questions, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination that are consistent with social justice." Duhaney et al. (2022) further support this approach by advocating for critical race pedagogy as "an essential framework to promote and enrich social work learning environments" where students can "engage in courageous conversations about race, racism, power and oppression to cultivate their agency and critical consciousness through ongoing reflection" (p. 151). They argue that these conversations help students understand the connections between individual experiences and broader systemic issues, particularly amid the COVID-19 pandemic that has disproportionately impacted racialized communities.

Creating Spaces for Collective Analysis

Social workers should create spaces where clients can collectively analyze their experiences and develop critical consciousness. This might include support groups focused on systemic issues, community forums, or participatory research projects that enable community members to investigate issues affecting them. These spaces should employ relational organizing approaches, centering participants' interests and experiences rather than imposing predetermined frameworks. This approach builds ownership and sustainability while fostering authentic critical consciousness.

Souto and Sotkasiira (2022) describe how critical career counselors in Finland relocated guidance from formal institutions to everyday spaces that were more comfortable for clients, creating opportunities for collective analysis of experiences. This relocation "served as a means to reduce the power relations and hierarchies between the counsellor and the client," allowing for safer spaces to share experiences related to racism and discrimination. Similarly, Cane and Tadam (2023) highlight how round-table focus group discussions provided "a catalyst for engaging in conversations with colleagues working in different settings across the country about the challenges, experiences, what is going well, and what is going not so well in regards to anti-racist practice."

Creating these spaces aligns with hooks' (1994) emphasis on the importance of collective spaces in her concept of "learning communities." She argues that "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy... To enter that classroom with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement was to transgress" (p. 12). This understanding can be applied to social work practice by creating spaces where clients can experience the excitement of collective analysis and mutual support.

The importance of creating such spaces is further highlighted in Duhaney et al.'s (2022) discussion of critical race pedagogy, which emphasizes "the racialized identities and experiences of both educators and racialized students" (p. 157). They argue that social work educators must create learning environments where students can engage in "high-level critical self-reflection and dialogue to disrupt the status quo, challenge dominant discourses, and advance social justice" (p. 152).

Integrating Identity-Based and Systemic Approaches

The results from the study's systematic thematic analysis also suggest that social workers should integrate identity-based understanding with systemic analysis in their practice in order to enrich their practice with a systems-based approach undergirded by critical consciousness that empowers both client and clinician to address the ecological nature of target issues. This means recognizing how different aspects of identity shape clients' experiences while also identifying the structural factors that affect all clients. This integration helps practitioners avoid both the pitfalls of individualization (focusing solely on personal identity without systemic analysis) and class reductionism (ignoring the specific impacts of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression). It enables more nuanced and effective approaches to supporting diverse clients and communities.

Lee et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of mentors acknowledging "the historical and institutional meaning of the multiple and intersectional social identities represented in the relationship." They note that "within the field of social work and research, senior mentors often hold multiple identities from privileged social groups while mentees may hold fewer." Their anti-racist mentoring model calls for mentors to "identify those structures and practices that systematically function as barriers to those possessing marginalized and racialized identities, question their relevance, and work collaboratively toward positive change."

Williams (2009) further illuminates this issue by discussing how the experiences of Black social workers and practice teachers are shaped by both race and other aspects of identity. She notes that "commonality of a Black experience between the practice teacher and student is not a given. Many other elements of their multi-dimensional identities, including ethnicity, class, sexuality and age, will inform how they can engage in the teaching and learning process with each other" (p. 505). This recognition of intersectional identities is essential for developing

nuanced approaches to anti-oppressive practice that account for the complex ways oppression operates in people's lives.

Unsettling Reflexivity as a Practice Approach

Social workers should engage in unsettling reflexivity that goes beyond traditional reflective practice to interrogate power dynamics, question assumptions, and disrupt hegemonic narratives. This approach challenges social workers to examine their own positionality and complicity in systems of oppression, moving beyond superficial acknowledgments of privilege to engage in ongoing critical self-examination and action.

Tang Yan et al. (2022) describe unsettling reflexivity as a critical race pedagogy tool that "disrupt[s] and contest[s] systems of power in social work education." They distinguish between traditional reflexivity, which can "reinforce colonial, neoliberal, and colorblind approaches to knowledge production through claims of validity and legitimization from a social location of privilege," and unsettling reflexivity, which engages in "practices of confounding disruptions" and pushes toward "unfamiliar and uncomfortable arenas of continued struggle by visibilizing and challenging white colonial liberal discourses."

This approach aligns with what Cane and Tadam (2023) describe as "race wrestling," which "involves disrupting an environment that promotes colour-muting, silencing victims of racism and micro-aggressions, and challenging oversimplified ways of understanding diversity while encouraging critical reflection, racial consciousness, self-awareness and skills of anti-racist practice." They argue that social work education needs to create opportunities for students to "learn about, and with, others from minoritised ethnic groups and to disrupt, in some cases, the

inherent belief that Eurocentrism and models of working that favour the white dominant perspective are the only approaches to social work education, training, and practice."

Duhaney et al. (2022) further emphasize the importance of reflexivity in critical race pedagogy, noting that it helps students "develop critical thinking skills through facilitating an understanding of how they engage with race and racism, and how this, in turn, impacts the ways they interact with racialized people" (p. 158). They argue that reflexivity should be unsettling, pushing students beyond their comfort zones to examine their own complicity in systems of oppression.

Connecting Clients to Collective Action

The study's findings also highlight the importance of social workers should connect clients to opportunities for collective action that address the root causes of their challenges. This might involve partnerships with social movement organizations, support for community organizing initiatives, or development of mutual aid networks. These connections help clients move from awareness of structural issues to active engagement in changing them, fostering agency and empowerment. Social workers can play important roles in facilitating these connections while respecting client autonomy and leadership.

Souto and Sotkasiira (2022) describe how critically-oriented counselors in Finland engaged in advocacy on behalf of oppressed minorities as a form of ally work. They note that "advocacy through career guidance took place on various levels," including helping clients navigate bureaucratic systems, standing with them when they faced discrimination, challenging career guidance practices that contributed to racial and gendered segregation in the labor market,

and engaging in political activism to change unjust systems. This multi-level approach to advocacy connects individual support with broader systemic change efforts. Freire (1970/2000) emphasizes that authentic liberation requires collective action: "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). This understanding suggests that social workers should support clients in moving beyond individual coping strategies to engage in collective efforts to transform oppressive conditions.

Brock-Petrossius et al. (2022) extend this perspective by arguing for an abolitionist approach to collective action that focuses on building power in marginalized communities. They emphasize that social workers should use "all the economic, political, and practice-based resources [they] hold to dismantle policies, practices, cultural norms, and institutions that disempower and commit violence against Black, Indigenous, or Brown and marginalized communities" while also supporting "efforts to build political and economic power in Black, Indigenous, or Brown and poor communities" (p. 230). This approach recognizes that connecting clients to collective action is not just about addressing immediate needs but about transforming the systems that create those needs in the first place.

All in all, developing critical consciousness has profound implications for social work praxis at multiple levels. By reframing individual struggles as systemic issues, creating spaces for collective analysis, challenging professional hierarchies, moving from social justice to abolition, integrating identity-based and systemic approaches, engaging in unsettling reflexivity, building anti-racist mentoring relationships, connecting clients to collective action, and embracing a global social work perspective, social workers can contribute to transformative change that addresses the root causes of social problems.

These approaches require ongoing commitment and courage from practitioners who must navigate tensions between professional norms and social justice values. However, they offer pathways to more authentic, effective, and liberatory forms of social work practice that align with the profession's ethical commitments to social justice and human dignity. As Duhaney et al. (2022) remind us, "By forefronting critical race pedagogies, educators can portray the stories and experiences of racialized people as legitimate and valid" (p. 158), moving toward a social work praxis that truly serves the goals of liberation and transformation.

Implications for Social Work Research

This study offers several valuable insights for social work research, particularly in understanding how individuals develop and maintain a critical awareness of social injustices. The identification of catalytic experiences leading to cognitive dissonance highlights the importance of understanding the specific events or moments that spark an individual's recognition of systemic inequalities. For social work researchers, this suggests exploring the life histories and turning points of activists and individuals engaged in social change to better understand the genesis of their critical consciousness. Furthermore, the study's emphasis on supportive environments for processing contradictions underscores the role of community and dialogue in fostering deeper understanding. Research in social work could further investigate the characteristics of these supportive spaces and how social workers can effectively create and facilitate such environments for clients and communities navigating systemic challenges.

The study's findings regarding challenging internalized capitalist beliefs and the significance of relational organizing practices also hold considerable relevance for social work research. Considering the ways individuals within social movements grapple with and overcome

dominant ideologies can inform social work interventions aimed at empowering individuals to critically analyze their own experiences within broader societal structures. Moreover, the emphasis on relational organizing, where personal connections and shared experiences drive collective action, points to the importance of studying the dynamics of community building and social support networks in fostering social change. Social work research could explore how these relational aspects can be leveraged in various practice settings to promote client empowerment and collective action.

Finally, the study's exploration of identity integration within systemic critique and the translation of critical analysis into transformative action provides crucial avenues for social work research. Understanding how individuals reconcile their personal identities with a broader critique of systemic oppression can inform culturally responsive and identity-affirming social work practices. The study's focus on local engagement and coalition-building as pathways for action suggests the need for research that examines the effectiveness of different community organizing models and the role of inter-group collaboration in achieving social justice goals. The identified barriers of geographic inaccessibility and organizational contradictions also offer important areas for future research aimed at enhancing the accessibility and effectiveness of social movement organizations and similar social change initiatives that social workers often collaborate with or support.

Implications for Social Movement Praxis

Addressing Knowledge Gaps in Social Movement Literature

The study addresses several important knowledge gaps identified in contemporary social movement literature. Bevington and Dixon (2005) note that "the dominant American social movement scholarship has become detached from the concerns of actual social movements" (p. 185), resulting in theory that activists rarely find useful. Our research responds directly to this critique by examining how critical consciousness develops and sustains among movement participants, producing insights grounded in activists' lived experiences.

The findings on catalytic foundations and supportive environments fill a significant gap identified by Gillan (2008), who argues that "the ideational content of social movements is often obscured by a focus on particular, immediate goals; by their orientation to certain forms of action; and by the mediated, simplified nature of their communication" (p. 247). By exploring the deep ideational processes that underpin engagement, this study illuminates the complex belief structures that motivate action beyond immediate tactical concerns. This addresses what Gillan calls "orientational frames" or worldviews that help movement participants understand significant events and justify responses to them.

Additionally, the findings uncovered here on identity-integrated analysis contribute to resolving what Chouhy (2020) identifies as an artificial separation between identity politics and broader structural critique in social movement studies. Chouhy (2020) notes that while new social movement theories emphasize identity, they often fail to account for "the complexity of the RSMOs [radical social movement organizations] about which we are attempting to theorize"

(p. 577). This study demonstrates how effective movements integrate identity-based understanding with systemic critique rather than treating these as separate approaches.

Finally, this research on praxis pathways addresses the gap identified by Yates (2015) regarding the connection between micropolitics and broader movement goals. Yates argues that scholars have insufficiently explored "how the macro- and micropolitical connect" (p. 8) within movements. The study's findings on concrete action pathways illuminate how critical consciousness translates into various forms of engagement that bridge personal transformation and structural change.

Multiple Pathways to Engagement

The themes of the study suggest social movements should recognize the diverse catalytic experiences that lead to critical consciousness and create multiple entry points based on these varied experiences. This aligns with Bevington and Dixon's (2005) concept of "movement-relevant theory," which emphasizes the importance of theoretical approaches that speak directly to activists' concerns. Findings captured in this study on catalytic foundations, where participants described diverse experiences creating cognitive dissonance between lived realities and dominant narratives, support the argument that movements need recruitment and engagement strategies that connect with a range of motivations and interests.

This perspective is further supported by Chouhy's (2020) analysis, which critiques the tendency to oversimplify movement participation into uniform experiences. He argues that movements often contain dynamic tensions between different ideological positions, with participants navigating complex webs of meaning and identity. The study findings suggest that

organizations could develop multiple issue campaigns that appeal to different constituencies while connecting these issues to a broader analysis. Gillan (2008) proposes a hermeneutic approach to understanding the "orientational frames" within movements, which can help identify the diversity of meaning-making processes that guide activist engagement. This approach recognizes that frames are not simply strategic tools but deeply held belief structures that motivate participation, aligning with our finding that identity-integrated analysis creates more sustainable critical consciousness.

Similarly, the findings also suggest that supportive environments are where contradictions can be processed collectively resonates with hooks' (1994) concept of "engaged pedagogy," suggesting movements need to develop diverse approaches to education and engagement. This multi-pathway approach aligns with Kwok and Chan's (2024) examination of how data and digital technologies shape contemporary mobilization, where multiple channels of engagement become increasingly important for reaching diverse participants.

Decentralized, Accessible Structures

The study's findings on organizational barriers suggest that movements could benefit from developing decentralized, accessible structures that enable participation from diverse communities. Similarly, the value of supportive environments that employ relational organizing approaches reflects Yates' (2015) concept of prefigurative politics, which emphasizes the importance of aligning organizational structures with movement values. As Yates notes, prefiguration combines "experimentation, the circulation of political perspectives, the production of new norms and conduct, material consolidation, and diffusion" (p. 17).

The findings support the argument that organizations should review their decision-making processes to ensure transparency and inclusivity. This aligns with Fitzgerald and Rodgers' (2000) model of radical social movement organizations (RSMOs), which emphasizes non-hierarchical leadership, participatory democracy, and egalitarian structures. They assert that radical social movement organizations (RSMOs) consciously establish "non-hierarchical organizational structures, with an 'inclination toward group-centered leadership, rather than toward a leader-centered group pattern of organization'" (p. 579).

Similarly, the study's thematic analysis discovery of the importance of praxis pathways, particularly local political engagement and coalition-building around specific projects, suggest that movements need organizational structures that facilitate concrete action. This approach recognizes the interconnection between means and ends in social change work, requiring movements to embody the values they seek to promote. Su and Jagninski's (2013) findings on youth organizing likewise emphasized how geographic inaccessibility and hierarchical decision-making processes negatively impact engagement, which resonates with this study's emphasis on creating supportive environments where contradictions can be processed collectively.

Integrating Theory and Practice

Finally, the study's findings on praxis pathways suggest social movements should integrate theoretical education with practical experience, recognizing that critical consciousness develops through the interaction of reflection and action. This directly addresses Bevington and Dixon's (2005) concern that movement scholarship has become disconnected from activists'

needs. They argue for "movement-relevant theory" that emerges from direct engagement with movement practice while contributing meaningful insights to enhance that practice.

The findings indicate that educational programming could connect directly to organizing campaigns, helping members apply conceptual frameworks to concrete situations. This integration helps sustain engagement by demonstrating the relevance of theoretical analysis to real-world change. It also builds members' capacity to analyze new situations and develop effective strategies in changing contexts. This approach directly addresses what Chouhy (2020) identifies as the tension between theory and practice in social movements, where intellectuals and movements often operate in separate spheres despite their potential to inform each other's work productively.

By implementing these approaches informed by this study's findings on catalytic foundations, supportive environments, identity-integrated analysis, and praxis pathways, social movements can foster more effective and sustainable engagement, building capacity for long-term social transformation while achieving meaningful victories in the present moment.

Conclusion

This study provides important insights into how critical consciousness develops within anti-oppressive social movement organizations. The findings reveal that critical consciousness emerges through catalytic experiences that create cognitive dissonance, develops within safe spaces that allow collective processing of contradictions, and sustains itself through relational organizing practices that embody critical pedagogy principles. These findings have significant implications for social work education, social work research, social work practice, and social

movement research and organizing. By understanding the conditions that foster critical consciousness and the barriers that impede it, social work educators and practitioners alike as well as grassroots community organizing, can develop more effective approaches to challenging oppression and promoting social transformation.

As Freire (1970/2000) states, "The pursuit of full humanity... cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity" (p. 85). This insight underscores the importance of creating collaborative spaces where critical consciousness can develop through dialogue and collective action. Similarly, hooks (1994) emphasizes that "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12), highlighting the transformative potential of educational spaces that foster critical consciousness. Ultimately, the study suggests that critical consciousness is not a static achievement but an ongoing process that requires continuous cultivation through organizational practices that embody anti-oppressive values. By creating conditions that support this process, both social work and social movements can contribute to developing the critical consciousness necessary for meaningful social change.

As Wagner (2005) argues, the goal of anti-oppression work is not to provide "students with all the answers" but to "introduce them to the tools to deconstruct the world around them" (p. 272). Similarly, this study offers tools for understanding how critical consciousness develops, while recognizing that the work of fostering it is ongoing and context-specific. By building on these insights, educators, researchers, and practitioners of social movements, social work, and other professions committed to addressing racism and oppression can develop effective approaches to developing the critical consciousness necessary for challenging oppression and promoting justice in diverse contexts.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ROUND 1 PROTOCOL

Round 1

Introduction (to be used across all three rounds):

Thank you for participating in this interview. As I explained previously, I am really interested in how you became a member of your social movement organization and talking with you will help build a better understanding, appreciation, and application of best practices for social movement mobilization. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me.

Throughout the course of our time discussing your participation in DSA, I want to focus on your life experiences, how those experiences led you to membership in your organization, and how you've maintained consistent and active membership with DSA. Please feel free to take your time with your responses and gather your thoughts.

This interview should take no more than an hour, depending on how much we talk. And to just get formalities out of the way, I want to tell you that this interview is voluntary and that you can opt-out at any time for any reason. What's more, everything you say is anonymized, so if I share some quotes from the interview in a report, your identity will remain confidential.

If, at any point during our interview, you experience emotional distress or discomfort, please refer to contact information for external resources I sent via email ahead of our discussion.

Lastly, could I record our conversation? I will not share the recording with anyone. Having the recording will help me to focus on what you are saying by freeing me from notetaking while we are talking and so that the information discussed is appropriately depicted in my final report.

[If on Zoom]: You can turn off your webcam if you don't want your video to be taped. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Section 1: Upbringing

1. Can you tell me about your family background and upbringing?
2. What was your family like?
3. How did your family influence your values and beliefs?

Section 2: Socialization

4. Can you describe your earliest memories of learning about social norms, cultural practices, and beliefs?

5. How did you learn about these things?

Section 3: Nodal Events

6. How do you think your early life experiences have influenced your personality today?
7. Can you describe any pivotal experiences or events that have had a significant impact on your personal growth and development?

Political Identity

8. Can you describe your political identity and how you came to develop it?
9. What factors have influenced your political beliefs and values, and how have they changed over time?
10. In what ways have you participated in politics or civic engagement, and what motivated you to become involved?

Conclusion

11. What motivates you to be committed to racial justice, and how did you first become involved in social movement work?
12. How do you see your role within the movement, and what goals do you hope to achieve through your activism?
13. What made you choose to join DSA?

Closing

Thank you so much for talking with me today. I learned so much from it, and your experiences are incredibly rich. Moving forward, if any questions or concerns come up, you can reach out to me via email at your earliest convenience.

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ROUND 2 PROTOCOL

Round 2

Introduction:

- Remind participants about the purpose of the interview and thank them for participating.
- Emphasize that their responses are confidential, and you will respect their privacy.
- Ask for consent to record the session.

Section 1: Involvement and Activities:

1. Can you talk about your experiences in the social movement? What kind of activities have you been involved in to support the movement's goals and values?
2. Are there specific activities or roles that have been particularly meaningful for you? If so, please share.
3. What role does dialogue play in the work you've supported or participated in through DSA?

Section 2: Moments of Doubt:

4. Have there been times when you considered leaving the social movement? What led to these thoughts or feelings?
5. Can you tell us about any circumstances or experiences that made you question your participation in the movement?
6. What ultimately prevented you from leaving, and why did you decide to stay?

Section 3: Staying Focused:

7. How do you maintain your focus on the issues championed by the social movement, especially when other concerns or new issues arise?
8. Are there any strategies or practices that help you stay engaged and committed to the movement's goals, even as they may change or evolve?
9. Can you share examples of how the movement has adapted to address new challenges or changes in its goals and values?

Section 4: Lessons and Insights:

10. What have you learned from your experiences in the social movement, particularly in terms of maintaining your involvement and focus on its goals?
11. Have you observed any effective approaches or support mechanisms within the movement that help people stay engaged and committed?

Conclusion:

12. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experiences in the social movement, sustaining involvement, or dealing with changing issues?

APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ROUND 3 PROTOCOL

Round 3

Introduction:

- Remind participants of the research purpose and express gratitude for their continued participation.
- Reiterate the confidentiality of their responses and request consent for recording the session.

Section 1: Spreading the Message:

1. Can you share some ways in which you have actively worked to spread the message and increase the reach of the social movement?
2. Are there specific methods or strategies you've used to engage with others and promote the movement's goals and values?
3. What role do you see yourself playing in raising awareness about the movement's mission?

Section 2: Successful Strategies:

4. Reflect on your experiences in promoting the movement. Can you provide examples of strategies that have worked effectively in gaining support and attention?
5. How do you measure the success of these strategies, and what positive outcomes have you observed?

Section 3: Learning from Failure:

6. Have there been instances where your efforts to spread the message or increase the movement's impact didn't go as planned? Could you share some of these experiences?
7. What did you learn from these failures or challenges, and have they influenced your future actions in support of the movement?

Section 4: Assessing Success and Failure:

8. How do you know when your efforts have succeeded in advancing the movement's goals and values?
9. On the other hand, what indicators or signs do you look for to recognize when something hasn't worked as intended or has failed?
10. Are there specific feedback mechanisms or data you rely on to evaluate your impact within the movement?

Section 5: Lessons and Insights:

11. What have you learned from your experiences in trying to spread the message and enhance the movement's influence?
12. Can you share any insights about the challenges and successes you've encountered while striving to increase the movement's impact?

Conclusion:

13. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your efforts to promote the movement's

message or your experiences with success and setbacks?

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT LETTER

Unveiling Voices of Transformation: An Ethnomethodological Exploration of Critical Pedagogy in Anti-Racist Social Movement Organizations

***Instructions:** You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. You will be given a copy of this Informed Consent Agreement.*

Dear Participant,

My name is Chris Strickland and I am a doctoral candidate in the *School of Social Work* Department at the University of Georgia under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Matthew. I am inviting you to take part in a research study.

Purpose

The purpose of this interview is to learn more about your experiences as a member of the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) and to learn what inspired you to join and remain a part of the organization. I am trying to develop an understanding of how successful social movement organizations recruit and maintain an active membership to provide these insights for other DSA chapters and branches, and other social movement organizations engaged in similar work.

Participation Request

You are being invited to be in this research study because you are a member of DSA. If you agree to participate in this study:

- I will collect information related to the primary factors that motivated you to join DSA, the activities you have been involved in to support DSA's goals and values, and the ways you raise the general community's awareness about DSA and the issues it seeks to address.
- We will have a one-on-one, audio-recorded conversation about the above topics. It will take no more than 90 minutes and will be recorded for future

- analysis.
- After I have collected and analyzed the nuances of this and other interviews, I anticipate following up with you regarding my findings at the beginning of Fall 2024.

Voluntary Participation

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. The decision to refuse or withdraw will not affect any benefits the participant is otherwise entitled to as a DSA member or other activities that are otherwise conducted through the course of your participation as a part of the chapter.

Risks & Benefits

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. You may experience some discomfort or emotional reactions when discussing your experiences in DSA. However, your participation will contribute to increasing DSA's ability to mobilize potential community supporters and increasing a membership base that is paramount to the execution of DSA's goals.

Confidentiality

The information you share will remain confidential. I will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk, audio recordings will be securely stored on password-protected devices and cloud storage platforms. Access to these files will be restricted to the primary researcher and authorized members of the research team. All data will be anonymized to protect your identity.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Co- Investigator, Chris Strickland, at 470-365-7650, cas86985@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Chris Strickland

Appendix E

INTAKE SURVEY

Greetings!

The purpose of this survey is to learn more about your experiences as a member of the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) and to learn what inspired you to join and remain a part of the organization. We are trying to develop an understanding of how successful social movement organizations recruit and maintain an active membership to provide these insights for other DSA chapters and branches and other social movement organizations engaged in similar work. You are being invited to be in this research study because you are a member of DSA. If you agree to participate in this study:

We will collect information related to the primary factors that motivated you to join DSA, the activities you have been involved in to support DSA's goals and values, and the ways

you raise the general community's awareness about DSA and the issues it seeks to address. The information you share will remain confidential. We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. To reduce this risk, all data will be anonymized to protect your identity.

Eligibility

Are you 18 years of age or older?

Yes No

By clicking "Next" you agree to participate in the survey.

De-identified Code

Before we begin, we would like you to develop a unique, de-identified participant code that we will use for the survey and optional interview. To do so, please develop your code as follows: First name initial, favorite color, number of pets at home, last name/surname initial.

For example, if my name is John Doe, favorite color is red, and I have 1 dog at home, my code

would be as follows: jred1d. If you have no pets at home, please insert a “0”.

Enter your unique participant code below.

Involvement with DSA

How did you first become aware of DSA?

Social media

Friend/family recommendation Event participation

Other (please specify)

How long have you been a member of DSA?

Less than 6 months 6 months to a year 1-2 years

2-5 years

More than 5 years

What type of activities or events organized by the movement have you participated in recently? (Select all that apply)

Protests/Marches

Workshops/seminars Community outreach Fundraising events

Other (please specify)

How frequently do you participate in the organization’s activities?

Rarely (0-1 days)

Occasionally (2-3 days)

Regularly (4-5 days)

Very regularly (6 or more days)

Per Week Per Month

Have you taken on any leadership roles or responsibilities?

Yes No

What leadership role(s) or responsibilities have you taken on within DSA?

Demographic Information

Among the options provided, please choose all the ethnic or racial categories with which you identify.

Black or African American Asian

Hispanic/Latine

Native American/Alaska Native/First Nations Middle Eastern/North African

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander White

Prefer to self-identify

Prefer not to answer

What gender identity do you identify with? Select all that apply.

Woman Man

Transgender Woman / Trans Feminine Transgender Man / Trans Masculine Non-Binary / Genderqueer

Agender

Gender Fluid Two-spirit

Questioning or unsure

Prefer to self-identify

Prefer not to answer

Which term best describes your sexuality? Check all that apply.

Asexual Bisexual

Straight or heterosexual Lesbian

Gay Queer

Pansexual Questioning

Prefer to self-identify:

Prefer not to answer

Which age range do you associate yourself with?

18 – 24
25 – 34
35 – 44
45 – 54
55 – 64
65 – 74
75 or older
Prefer not to disclose

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

Less than high school High school graduate Some college
4 year degree
4 year degree
Professional degree Doctorate
Prefer to self-identify

Prefer not to answer

Which best describes your form of employment?

Employed full-time Employed part-time Unemployed
Student Retired
Self-employed/freelance Worker-owner
Interning

Unemployed Homemaker Studying
Military Retired
Not able to work
Prefer to self-identify

Prefer not to disclose

Please Select the range that best represents your annual household income:

Under \$20,000
\$20,000 - \$39,999 \$40,000 - \$59,999 \$60,000 - \$79,999 \$80,000 - \$99,000 \$100,000 -
\$149,999 \$150,000 - \$199,999
\$200,000 and above Prefer not to disclose

Powered by Qualtrics

Appendix F

MEMBER CHECKING INFOGRAPHIC

Unveiling Voices of Transformation

Experiences of NWGA Branch DSA Members: Joining & Remaining Active

Thank you for participating in our research on your experiences as a member of the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) in the NWGA Branch.

As outlined in the consent form, this study aims to learn what inspired you to join and remain part of the organization, and to understand how successful social movement organizations recruit and maintain active membership. Based on interviews with members of the NWGA Branch, we've identified key themes that help explain what brings people to DSA and what sustains their involvement. Please review these findings and let us know if they accurately reflect your experience.

Key Theme 1: Catalytic Experiences Drive Political Development

Catalytic Experiences

Our analysis found that specific catalytic experiences often inspired members to join DSA, including:

- Family economic struggles despite hard work
- Immigrant experiences and systemic barriers
- Witnessing or experiencing racism
- Geographic displacement (moving between different regions)

These experiences often created cognitive dissonance with previously held political views or family beliefs, opening pathways to seeking organizational membership in DSA.

"At some point, I just think to myself, like, I don't want people to have to work as hard and, like, have to struggle as much as my parents in order to basically live a decent middle-class life."

Key Theme 2: Navigating Diverse Information Environments

From Conservative to Progressive Frameworks

Many participants described journeys through predominantly conservative or apolitical information environments before finding pathways to DSA through:

Educational exposure to diverse perspectives

Personal relationships across racial and class lines

Overcoming right-wing internet "pipelines"

Exposure to academic frameworks that explained lived experiences

"I was, like, low key, pretty racist, like, I didn't know it. I wouldn't, I would never have said I was a racist.

But, like, we grow up in racialized communities."

Key Theme 3: Identity-Centered Political Development

Identity as Central, Not Secondary

Participants emphasized how various aspects of identity shaped their decision to join and remain active in DSA:

Racial identity fundamentally shaped political understanding

Immigrant family experiences revealed systemic barriers

Gender and sexuality often provided early paths to questioning

Class experience informed priorities but rarely in isolation from other identities

"I think above all, identity is important because it grounds you in why you do certain things, and how they relate to your class position."

Key Theme 4: Relational Organizing as Foundation for Sustained

Engagement

Relationships Over Ideology

Effective recruitment and sustained membership centered on relationships rather than abstract ideology:

Building genuine community before expecting ideological alignment

Meeting people where they are and validating incremental growth

Creating environments where people feel seen and valued

Connecting abstract theory to concrete personal experiences

"You are doing it wrong if you are explaining what the DSA is about, rather than explaining how the DSA relates to them."

Key Theme 5: Practice-Value Alignment Affects Membership Retention

Organizational Practices Matter

Participants' decisions to remain active in the NWGA Branch were influenced by whether practices aligned with stated values, focusing on:

Democratic and transparent decision-making
Geographic and physical accessibility of meetings
Inclusion of diverse members in leadership
Equitable distribution of organizational power

"General meetings are hard to get to for people who are not in Midtown. And even when they are there, they are very, very scripted."

Your Feedback

- 1. Do these themes accurately reflect your experience with joining and remaining active in the NWGA Branch of DSA?**
- 2. Is there anything important about your membership experience that isn't captured in these themes?**
- 3. Is there anything in these findings that doesn't resonate with your experience?**
- 4. What do you think is most important for other DSA chapters to understand about recruiting and maintaining active membership?**

Contact Information

Please share your feedback or concerns about these findings with:

Chris Strickland (Principal Co-Investigator)

Email: cas86985@uga.edu

Phone: 470-365-7650

If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact:

University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Email: IRB@uga.edu

Phone: 706-542-3199

Your feedback is confidential and will be used only to ensure our findings accurately represent participants' experiences with joining and remaining active in the NWGA Branch of ATLDSA.