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Teenage Girls' Narratives of Becoming Activists
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In March of 2003, hundreds of thousands of high school students all over the world took to the streets to protest the impending U.S.-led war in Iraq. Emily, from the San Francisco Bay Area, was 13 at the time. When I interviewed her several years later, a senior in high school, she told me that the main thing she remembers about 8th grade was all the anti-war protests. She went to every possible rally, student walkout, and march. But these anti-war protests were not the end of her teenage activism; over the next five years she coordinated an organization for women's rights at her high school, worked to oppose California ballot measures that would restrict the reproductive rights of teenage girls, and continued to go to protests and rallies on a variety of national issues. Similarly, Celia, an Italian exchange student who I met while she was living in Venezuela described the lead-up to war as the spark that led her and many of her peers to become activists. She was fourteen at the time. 'I began to educate myself more about this issue because I wanted to oppose what was being done. And many other youth were also doing this, like me, so a lot of spontaneous protests were born almost without organization at the beginning. And afterward we began to discuss and decide how to organize ourselves in order to continue with other activities and other projects.' Like Emily, Celia didn't stop there. In fact, she was so interested in social movements that she convinced her parents to let her spend a year living in Venezuela where she'd be able to see the unfolding political changes.

What leads girls like Emily and Celia to become involved in social movements? How do they understand this involvement? And how do they narrate their developing identities as teenage activists? This article analyses girls' stories about their entry into activism, examining

how they talk about the process of ‘becoming an activist.’ In particular, I show how girl activists’ constructions of their activist identities replicate many of the narrative conventions of coming of age tales as well as popular discourses of adolescence as a time of self-development. After describing some of the narrative themes found in these activist coming of age tales, I argue that girl activists’ emphasis on themselves as still ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’ activists enables a valuable political flexibility, openness, and the mobilization of their peers but also has the unintended consequence of contributing to their own invisibility and to the widespread dismissal of young people’s politics as merely practice for the future.

Mobilization and narrative:

Sociologists who study social movements have spent decades considering the forces that lead people to social movement participation (Corning & Myers, 2002). They have variously emphasized rational and calculated self-interest (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), social-psychological factors such as efficacy and strong identification with the group whose grievances the movement addresses (Klandermans, 1984; Snow & Oliver, 1993), participation in social networks from which individuals are recruited (Diani, 2004; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993), the processes of frame alignment (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986), and family background, class, education, and other elements of political socialization that support activist engagement (Sherkat & Blocker, 1994). Rather than taking up a position in these long-standing debates over the factors that are most predictive of participation, this paper instead follows a growing number of studies that examine how activists themselves talk about their routes into activism (Lyson, 2014; McGuire, Stewart, & Curtin, 2010; Ruiz-Junco, 2011; Valocchi, 2013). By looking to activists’ identity narratives, these newer studies focus not why some individuals participate while others

do not, but instead seek to understand the processes by which individuals come to see themselves as activists and how these processes are shaped by larger social structures, dynamics, and discourses.

Francesca Polletta (2006) has shown that storytelling plays a vital role in contemporary social movements. Stories, she argues, are politically potent but present their own significant limitations. One genre of social movement story is the ‘becoming activist’ tale, or the narrative of one’s entry into activism. Distinct from the mobilization tales that describe the emergence of a movement, ‘becoming activist’ stories are personal, highlighting activist biographies. However, they are not merely individual. Activist entry stories can serve to define the meaning of activist (Bobel, 2007), to construct the collective identity of an organization or broader movement, specifying who ‘belongs’ or ‘fits’ and who does not (Lyson, 2014; Lyytikäinen, 2013), and to lay out a trajectory for how others may come to be mobilized (Oyakawa, 2015). Further, activist stories of the self are socially patterned and embedded in larger cultural vocabularies, interpretive frameworks, and discursive contexts (Valocchi, 2013).

In their study of the life histories of extreme-right activists Linden and Klandermans (2007) outline three types of activist entry narratives: continuity, conversion, and compliance. Each type of narrative is linked to a distinct activist biography and trajectory. But activist entry stories are far from universal; recent scholarship highlights how class, race, and gender all influence the ways that individuals narrate their activist biographies (Lyson, 2014; Lyytikäinen, 2013; Valocchi, 2013). For example, Valocchi’s (2013) important contribution highlights three very different activist entry narratives for activists from distinct class backgrounds: activism as career, activism as calling, and activism as a way of life. This article contributes to this growing literature by exploring how dynamics of age and discourses of adolescence can structure and

infuse activists' narratives. In doing so, it adds another type of activist biographical story to those already catalogued by other scholars: the activist coming of age tale. In identifying and describing the features of girls' activist coming of age tales, I am not suggesting that these features are entirely absent from adults' narratives. Instead, I catalogue the elements of these narratives in order to explore their relationships with two prominent discourses of adolescence: the coming of age story and developmental discourses of adolescence as a time of "becoming."

Christy Rishoi (2003) traces the literary history of the coming of age genre to its roots in the *bildungsroman*, or novel of development. She argues that while male coming of age stories have been defined largely by a rugged individualism and search for self, women's coming of age tales instead, given the norms of gender socialization, propose a socially connected model for growing up. In both cases, however, the coming of age narrative 'privileges the autonomous individual who feels at odds with society... the subjects of coming of age narratives, like those of the earlier genres, construct themselves as outsiders, but unlike them they choose to remain marginalized at the end of their texts' (p. 63). Rishoi also suggests that coming of age narratives tend to highlight a widening scope of consciousness and a growing sense of awareness. Given that the formulas of the coming of age tale are pervasive in contemporary discussions of adolescence (Lesko, 2001), it is not surprising to find these narrative conventions also appearing in girl activists' identity talk.

Critical scholars of childhood, adolescence, and youth have all identified how developmentalist discourses that position young people as "becoming" rather than "being" have served to define young people as incapable, partial, and deficient in contrast to an imagined vision of the capable, complete, and rational adult (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Wyn and White, 1997). The developmental narratives deployed by popular psychology, educational

institutions, and media/culture industries continually invoke ideas that youth are lacking in various ways: lacking in reason, lacking in empathy, lacking in moral clarity, lacking in understanding of social rules and norms (Lesko, 2001). Scholars have argued that these discourses marginalize and disempower young people and dismiss their experiences in the present by focusing primarily on their status as future-adults (Gordon, 2010). However, narratives of youth as a time of becoming continue to be powerful and pervasive, and thus are often taken up by young people themselves (Budgeon, 2003) despite the fact that they can have negative consequences for young people's power and authority and are rooted in ageist and adult-centric modes of thinking (Gordon, 2010).

In contrast to the important critiques of narratives of young people as "becoming" found in the scholarship on childhood and youth, post-structuralism, performance studies, and contemporary feminist theories have generally embraced the idea that subjects and identities are always in process or always becoming, doing, or performing, rather than ontological beings (Butler, 1990; Rattansi and Phoenix, 2005). From this vantage, scholars of youth and childhood might consider embracing the idea of youth as becoming, and argue instead that all people, including adults, are becoming, rather than seeking to include youth in the domain of "being" or consider thinking about all people as both being and becoming (Uprichard, 2008). This debate is far beyond the scope of this particular article, but in the analysis that follows, I indicate some of the ways that girls themselves use the vocabulary of becoming when they are narrating their activist identities and, in the conclusion, suggest some of the complex and mixed implications of their use of this discourse.

Methods:

This analysis of girls' narratives of becoming activists is part of a larger study that explores the political identities and practices of teenage girl activists in five cities in North and South America – Vancouver, San Francisco, Mexico City, Caracas, and Argentina (Author, year). I conducted, recorded, and transcribed in-depth semi-structured interviews with 75 girls, approximately fifteen per city, attended and took extensive field notes on dozens of political events involving these teenage girls, and collected printed materials from the organizations in which these girl activists participated. Conducted in 2005-2006, the research focused on high-school aged girls who were actively involved in progressive or Leftist social movements. They organized around a wide range of social problems, including labour issues and youth labour rights, educational reform, environmental racism, economic justice, corporate power, human rights, gender equality, anti-racism, media democracy, indigenous rights, and political repression. In addition to being part of issue-specific groups and campaigns, some were also involved in socialist, communist, anarchist, Zapatista-informed, feminist, and other ideologically defined progressive parties, collectives and youth organizations. Their ages ranged from thirteen to nineteen, but the majority were sixteen or seventeen at the time they were interviewed. 17% identified as either poor or working class, 21% as lower-middle class, 49% as middle class, and 13% as upper-middle class. Ten said that they were lesbian, bisexual, or questioning. Given the complexities of racial and ethnic identities in these five very different locations it is difficult to quantify and summarize the racial breakdown of this group. But, as a very simplified descriptor, 21% of the girls identified as part of a non-dominant racial group in their country.

Interview transcripts, printed materials, and field notes were all imported into Atlas.ti, a qualitative coding and data analysis program, and were coded by the author using an inductive process. In the case of this article, that meant first identifying the narrative patterns in girls'

activist entry tales and then considering the various cultural tropes, narrative conventions, and discourses with which they were engaging – coming of age tales and vocabularies of becoming. Interviews and transcripts were in both English and Spanish, and I worked with and coded the interviews and quotes in the original language, only translating a quote near the end of the writing process. In this paper, for reasons of space, I focus primarily on themes and patterns that emerged across the five locations rather than on differences between or within national and local contexts. My analysis primarily focuses on discourses of age, rather than those of gender due to both space limitations and the paucity of comparable examples of teenage boys' activist narratives.

Becoming activist: narrative themes:

Coming of age narratives often highlight an individual's outsider status, exploring their feelings of non-belonging (Rishoi 2003). Amongst girl activists, this outsider status is articulated as a sense of their difference from other teens, a feeling that they are unlike many of their peers (Author, year). As I discuss in my larger work based on this research, many girl activists distinguished themselves from the other girls in their schools, saying that they just are not like the self-absorbed, silly, and foolish girls in their school who, in their view, only care about boys, shopping and the latest movies (Author, year). Becoming an activist is a way of finding others who are 'like you,' of finding a place to 'be oneself' in a world where you were not yet sure you fit. Finding activism, for them, is partly about finding somewhere to belong.

Ixtab, a lower middle-class Mexicana with a nose ring and a casual, easy-going attitude, grew up in a household where her family discussed politics and was supportive of social

movements, but her parents were not themselves activists. She was politically aware from a young age, but didn't know anyone her own age who was also interested in social movements:

For my whole life, from the time I was little, my parents made me see how things are. So, from the time I was little I knew who Che Guevara was, who others were. When the EZLN emerged I was only six years old, but I knew that they came out of earlier struggles, about the national liberation struggles and all of this. I was always interested [in social movements]. I remember in primary school I fought with the teachers about the strike at UNAM. They were against it, and said that it was just a bunch of rebels at UNAM who were just making the University look bad. And I fought with them and told them that they should realize that the students were fighting this struggle because right now it might just be one peso, but tomorrow it could be two, then three and then when our children want to go to the university it will just be a private school.

In addition to fighting with teachers, Ixtab said she would get frustrated that 'in my school, nobody cared about these issues.' Her friends, she said, 'didn't think like me.' She began to read more, but still didn't have a place where she could talk with people who shared her ideas and interests. Until 'one day one of the activists from the newspaper collective came to sell at my school, and he sold me the first issue. He invited me to a forum; it was one year ago on October 2nd.... It was really interesting, I met a lot of other people, and I began to go to more and more meetings. And, then, now, here we are, one year later.' Ixtab's story of becoming an activist is primarily the story of her shift from being a lone political thinker to a member of a group. It is a move from a lonely outsider position, to a significantly more supported one.

As with Ixtab's finding her activist self through finding a community, many girls described their entry into activism as being facilitated by personal relationships, both friendly and romantic, with other youth who were already involved. Friends and peers are key characters in girls' stories of their entry into activism. Niamh, a white teen from California described how her friend 'just dragged me to a meeting one day and she was like, come to this, and I was like, mmmm [unsure noise]. But we ended up going and I was like, I never knew all this action was happening.' This meeting was not, however, just a fluke. Niamh's story of becoming an activist

is much longer. As a sixth grader, 'I covered my backpack with like, 'save the world' and 'hug a tree' and I like tried to be a vegetarian.... I always was like interested in like environmental stuff and I was like, oh, environmental day, I'll have to go to that, or like, have to make sure to recycle and all that stuff.' Then, as she got into high school, she started to become more interested in 'social justice stuff.' She continued, 'this is kinda weird to say to some people, but like the Catholic church, I've been involved in my youth group for a really long time and that is the only like movement where I've actually gone out and like worked with the homeless and like done like that kind of thing.' This service work was good, but she said, she 'wished that I could do more, like create an organization that could give them jobs so it wouldn't be like here's a package of food every once in a while. So doing things like that started getting me into social activism.' Volunteering was better than just writing slogans on her backpack, but it still wasn't quite what she wanted to do in terms of changing the world. When her friend took her to a social movement meeting, Niamh was excited about the prospect of other approaches to social change. Her friend was a key character in the tale, but the story is also about Niamh's own personal search for the right kind of social action for her. Now, Niamh is not just a volunteer, but an activist who is part of several groups that work on issues of fair trade, corporate power, and immigrant rights. In her narrative, becoming an activist was presented as the last step in a longer process of figuring out how she wanted to engage with the world and create the kinds of changes she imagined.

In contrast to the transformative and supportive role of peers, parents have a very different place in coming of age tales. Instead of being the source of self-discovery, parents represent a more passive childhood that must be left behind through the process of individuation and growing up. Coming of age, as a narrative trope, is partly about distinguishing oneself from one's parents and background. The same is true in girls' stories of their activist selves, but this

takes two different forms, depending on the level of political affinity between the girl and her family. Byeong-Chul Park (1993) argues that there are two competing approaches to understanding the motivations of youth activists as they relate to their parents: generational conflict and lineage socialization, or ‘are they rebelling against the historical legacy of the older generation or simply ‘living out’ their parents’ values in practice’ (p. 172). While neither of these images is entirely fair to youth in that both assume youth activist motivations to be very different from the political motivations of adults *and* both treat youthful politics as primarily irrational or automatic, youth activists’ narratives about their relationships to activism do make reference to the political views and practices of their parents.

Nearly thirty percent of the girl activists I interviewed said they held very different political views from their parents, but only a handful experienced major conflict with their parents over politics. And, while disagreement with their parents was part of the context of their activism, the girls themselves never described it as a reason for their involvement. Obviously, few people would expect youth to acknowledge the possibility that their political engagement is just a form of rebellion against parents. But, if the few girls who were experiencing conflict with their parents over their activism were, in fact, engaged in activism for the sake of rebellion, we could expect them to emphasize this conflict, the pleasure of upsetting their parents, or other elements of this relationship far more than they did. Instead, they tended to shrug off these conflicts, saying that the disagreements were just ‘kinda annoying,’ but ‘not really a big deal.’ And, like other girl activists, they were passionate about their beliefs, articulate about social problems, and appeared to have become engaged in activism for political, and not just personal, reasons. The idea of rebelling against one’s parents was simply not part of young women’s narratives about their own routes into activism.

Representing the other side of this debate are those girls who come from long family traditions of Left activism and for whom activism has always been a part of daily life. Approximately a quarter of the girls I interviewed had a parent who was still, or had once been, engaged in social movements and activism. Ramona, a bisexual middle-class Mexicana with light skin, medium-brown dreadlocks and funky, brightly coloured clothing is one example of a girl from an activist family. Her parents ‘were involved in lots of things and I always went with them when they went to meetings. From the time I was little, I went with them.’ As she got older, she went from being taken to activist events with parents to doing activism alongside her parents. In middle school, she and several of her friends kept getting in trouble because they were resisting the administration’s dress code which required skirts below their knees and shoes without heels. ‘It was a scandal. And my parents, when they came, they came to give out fliers! So, that was my first political work.’ While this story may not at first appear to be one of differentiation, Ramona and other girls like her went to great lengths to describe how their activism differed from that of their parents. A senior in high school when I met her, Ramona was quick to point out that her activism now was her own and not the activism of her parents. She was one of the founding members of a new Zapatista-inspired *cubiculo* in her school, and, she says that this mode of activism, this perspective on politics, is a little bit different than what her parents might want her to be doing. For girls like Ramona, being an activist is more than just being a mirror image of their parents. Their relationships to their activism changed over time and they made political decisions that built upon what they had learned from their families, but also moved in some different directions.

Moving in new political directions sometimes meant using different political tactics than their parents. Clare, a San Francisco Bay Area teen who was concerned with redefining activism

so that it goes beyond marches, articulated this definitional expansion as partly about developing political practices that differ from those of her parents and their generation. Her dad grew up in Colombia and her mom in the U.S., and they were both involved in the student and youth movements of the sixties. Clare thinks about

The way that they were active, and I think ‘that’s like, kind of simple, because it’s like what’s been done.’ So that is kinda why I feel like I do about the marches. And I should give them some credit for how they've taught me.... I might like shake them off, like ‘your beliefs are really oversimplified, you are just living in the sixties where everything was great, we have to look at the real world and we have to take a fresh approach.’ But the fact is that they're my parents and they probably know so much more than I do... I guess I'm different from them.

For Clare, being an activist has meant engaging in different types of political action than her parents. Even though she may have begun her activism alongside her family, going to her first march with her mom, she has been working to become her own kind of activist along the way. Countering claims that young activists are simply following in their parents’ footsteps, the narratives of girls like Ramona and Clare highlight their changing relationships to activism and the choices they have made as they develop their own distinctive activist identities, again drawing on some of the narrative conventions of a coming of age tale.

In addition to repeating the character types found in coming of age stories (outsider heroes, supportive peers, and confused or restrictive parents), girls’ narratives of becoming activists also draw on some of the themes of this genre. In particular, Rishoi (2003) finds that the genre often highlights an individual’s widening perspectives on the world around them. These growing insights, or the shift from innocence to knowledge, were an important part of many girls’ tales. Sometimes told in terms of an ‘aha moment,’ and other times described as a steady process of learning more about ‘how messed up the world is,’ the development of a broader social consciousness was a key part of girls’ stories of their entry to activism. Haile, a Chinese-

Canadian seventeen-year-old, described her own process of realization and self-education: ‘In middle school I was very into appearance and very ignorant, I think. And it was just kind of an awakening. I’ve since noticed lots of injustices, but [gender inequality] was the first thing I noticed in my day-to-day life. And once I got into that and did the research I was so, um, feverish with the research. And, once I got that, I broadened and started doing everything -- not everything, but a broader variety.’ Haile went on to say that, for her, this awareness, ‘started personal and then I saw that it was the same kind of thing everywhere.... It made me feel better that it wasn't just my family, that it's a problem far and wide. Yeah, and I was inspired because when people get together they can change things. Even on a political level it can affect on the personal level too.... So that was kind of my gateway to ‘oh, yeah, there's something that's wrong and I can do something about it.’ So it was just a change in my head.’ Haile’s own experiences with gender inequality in her family led her to seek out more information, more social analysis. And, through her reading, she came to see how this issue was a social problem and changeable. She then took this perspective with her into her high school years, becoming involved in her global issues club, a feminist newspaper, and an Asian community newspaper. Haile’s story, in emphasizing her newfound ideas and insights, emphasizes a process of becoming aware -- a common feature of coming of age narratives.

A final narrative theme in many girls’ stories about their entry into activism is the claim that they are *still* in the process of becoming activists. According to these girls, they had not yet arrived at an activist identity, but were still on a journey toward this identity. Girls’ firm claim that they are ‘not yet’ activists and are still in the process of becoming activists, is perhaps the most distinctive feature of their narratives. Unlike the adult-narrated stories of entry into social movements catalogued in the academic literature (Linden and Klandermans 2007; Lyson, 2014;

Valocchi, 2013), when teenagers tell these stories, they are stories that are very much in process. Chris Bobel (2007) ‘challenges the assumption that social movement participants necessarily and automatically identify as activists’ (p. 148). She finds that some people distinguish between ‘doing activism’ and ‘being an activist.’ But, while Bobel’s young adult interviewees claim to ‘do activism’ rather than ‘be activists,’ my own research suggests a third possible position in relationship to an activist identity: that of ‘becoming activist.’ Similar to Bobel’s participants who held activists to a very high standard that they felt they did not meet, many of the girls I interviewed also describe activists as people who are truly extraordinary. As Violet said, ‘there is a lot of honour that goes with the word ‘activism’ and people who put the energy in.... It comes with a lot of honour, a lot of, I don't know – ‘wow, an activist.’’ Activists, in this view, are accomplished, committed, passionate, knowledgeable, and effective organizers. Although many girls described activist identity as quite special, and as something they are not yet worthy of claiming, they didn’t see it as out of reach. As Diana put it, ‘activist is such a like, up-there word. Like it sounds like anyone who is activist, who in my mind I admire, and who I think has done like amazing things for other people, and I think I’m maybe on my way to being an activist, but it is something that I would like to be and that I hope to be. And I’ll have to put a lot of work into it.’ These girls narrate themselves as being on the continuing route to becoming an activist.

Rosa, a Mexicana active in both a school *cubiculo* and a youth collective that organizes in her neighbourhood, was one of the approximately 20 girls, located in all five cities, who explicitly stated that they did not feel like they deserved to identify themselves as activists (yet). She said that she couldn’t really claim the mantle of activist because she is ‘still lacking a lot, so much.’ Even though she spoke eloquently and clearly on her reasons for being ‘opposed to capitalism, globalization, neoliberalism,’ and her thoughts on Marxism and anarchism, Rosa told

me, 'I'm not well informed politically. Yes, I've read a lot of things, but I'm still missing a lot more.' Although Rosa was, in part, dismissing what she knows, framing her story as a tale of "becoming activist" also let her articulate what she has learned and read while maintaining a socially acceptable level of both feminine and youthful humility. Similarly, Gloria indicated that she wasn't working hard enough or putting enough time in to really be an activist: 'I think of activists as participating actively in politics, in the community, in leadership, and I don't participate *really* actively because I am in school. But the time that I have left after my studies, I dedicate to this. In reality, I put more time into this than into my studies. I study in the morning and the rest of the afternoon I dedicate to the movement.... But this isn't totally active because I know a lot of people who spend the whole day on this.' Despite spending several hours every day on political activities and the student movement, Gloria felt she just wasn't active enough to claim the mantle of activist. Narratives of *becoming* activists give girls the space to talk about what they know and about what they have accomplished, but also allow them to simultaneously highlight their on-going growth and development. However, it is my argument that given the power and prevalence of widespread ideas about adolescence as a period of growth, self-discovery and self-change, their emphasis on becoming is not only a way to manage their relationship to what Bobel calls 'the perfect standard' for activist identity, but is also an age-inflected narrative practice. The focus on becoming activist rather than being activist suggests that girl activists continue to see themselves, as young people, as unfinished subjects-in-process.

The teenage activist self-in-formation:

Girls' narratives of themselves as becoming activists invoke and repeat several key elements of contemporary coming of age tales: the search for belonging and figuring out where

one fits in the world, a growing and expanding awareness, transformative peer relationships, and differentiation from parents. In addition to repeating tropes of this powerful cultural resource, their varied narratives also indicate that there is no singular route into activism. Although there are some patterns and common features in these narratives, their diversity suggests that the process of becoming an activist is not entirely predictable. For some girls, it was seen as a logical and obvious development of who they already were and what they already believed. They had just been waiting for the right opportunity or group to present itself. For others, it was something they came upon through new friends, sought out after a particular experience, or began to engage in due to what they saw as a new social problem.

Girls' stories of their entry to activism detail processes of both continuity and change. However, unlike the adult model described by Linden and Klandermans (2007), compliance, or the idea of entering activism due to circumstances beyond one's control, is largely absent from their narratives. Their narratives of becoming activist are also not stories of a major break from their past nor are they tales of simply continuing to act as they always have (Linden and Klandermans 2007), but instead are accounts of changing selves that are growing up, becoming aware, and discovering new possibilities for who they want to be and what they want to do in their lives. And, more importantly, unlike adults, their stories tend to emphasize the *on-going* process of becoming an activist, rather than offering a completed tale that ends with the individual now 'being' an activist (Oyakawa, 2015; Valocchi, 2013). Drawing on both coming of age conventions and developmental discourses on adolescence as a time of exploration and formation of self (Lesko, 1996; Wyn & White, 1997), girls produce an age-inflected set of activist identity narratives.

To conclude, I want to consider some of the implications of girls' construction of an activist self that is in process, rather than an activist self that is fixed or already achieved. The open-ended quality of their coming of age narratives highlights the fact that they think that they have a great deal still to learn, that they themselves are still growing and changing. It suggests an openness to new ideas, new suggestions, and to discussion, rather than a dogmatic or already determined position on any given issue. Their stories of selves-in-process encourage girl activists to be particularly flexible, creative, and willing to engage with a variety of different ideas in their activism. As I've written elsewhere (Author, year), they tend not to think they have found 'the answer' to a given political problem, but instead strive to create opportunities for young people to discuss political issues, learn from one another, and develop political responses together.

Girls' tales of becoming activists are also strategically and practically useful for encouraging the political participation of their peers. Their emphasis on the process of becoming an activist serves to create a welcoming atmosphere within their political organizations: if you don't have to already *be* an activist to participate, anyone can begin engaging in activism. Girl activists present themselves as teens who have started moving in a direction that any other teen can also take, and they invite other teens to join them. Their narratives of becoming activists are not tales of heroism, of overcoming barriers, or celebrations of their incredible feats, but are instead stories of on-going growth and learning, something that is open to all youth. Girls' activist coming-of-age narratives highlight the process by which they, ordinary girls, become activists. Anyone, they say, can become an activist.

Framing themselves as becoming activists also gives girls a chance to acknowledge some of the things that they have done and achieved, while still maintaining humility. This is a distinctly gendered process; 'good girls' are modest and humble, while those who speak too

forcefully about their accomplishments are often considered arrogant (Bent & Switzer, 2016; Brown, 2016). Such gendered expectations push girls to dismiss and downplay their accomplishments out of fear of appearing too bold, too proud, too self-assured. The gendered quality of girls' narratives here is confirmed by findings that white male youth activists more often construct themselves as radical teen superheroes (Gordon, 2010). Like many other high-achieving girls and young women, girl activists do not want to appear to be too proud of themselves and their accomplishments. However, girl activists' humility also unfortunately contributes to their continued invisibility within social movements. If they do not loudly proclaim their activist abilities, it is not likely that adults will realize their valuable contributions and impressive political organizing skills.

Finally, in drawing on the traditions of coming of age narratives and developmental discourses on adolescence, girls also unwittingly replicate ideas about young people as subordinate, incomplete or deficient. Coming of age narratives inevitably position childhood as 'lacking,' and the child as innocent, incapable, unable, and not a full subject. Even the adolescent, as the one who is still 'in process,' is assumed to be less than what he or she will be as an adult. In contrast to the previous points, coming of age narratives are not necessarily a celebration of the perpetually-learning, perpetually-changing self, but also suggest that this period of growth and change will end and that the adolescent will, eventually, arrive at a better and more enlightened adult state. In this way, by emphasizing their 'becoming' rather than their 'being' activists, these girls also unwittingly contribute to the long-standing idea that the experiences of childhood and youth are primarily relevant for how they impact the supposedly more 'real' world of adulthood and adult politics (Gordon, 2010; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998).

Looking at activists' stories of their entry into social movements and activism sheds light on the collective identities being created within a given social movement terrain. My research with teenage girls suggests that these stories may be shaped by age categories and are not universal. Drawing on a particular set of cultural discourses about adolescence as a time of self-creation and self-discovery, teenage girl activists produce narratives of the activist self that are distinct from those produced by adults. In addition to illuminating some of the dynamics and implications of these narratives for the identities and practices of teenage girl activists, this research also suggests the need for further scholarship on the diversity of narratives of mobilization and social movement participation. Much as age is relevant to these stories and to versions of the activist self that they produce, we should consider how differences of race, nation, ability, religion, or the specific movement context intersect to shape activists' narratives of entry, and how these differences change a movements' collective identity processes, mobilization strategies, and political practices.

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