



## ***Personal to Political: How Gender is Associated with Black Activism***

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### **Abstract**

This study looks at how gender is associated with black activism through the experiences of five leaders in the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP). By analyzing the autobiographies of *Angela Davis*, *Assata Shakur*, *Bobby Seale*, *Elaine Brown*, and *Huey Newton*, connections between activism, parental relationships, school perception, identity development, and an understanding of social inequality will be shown. Contributing factors for the individual's activism along with the similarities and differences in experiences as black men and women will be discussed. This study also examines the root causes of activism centering on youth experiences. While it may not answer the question of which gender is more active, it may provide further insight as to how black leaders are formed. This focus on the developmental stage for black youth may lead to a better understanding as to how ideas play out. Literature on activism and engagement will be used to analyze what are the most important themes for activism in black youth. Literature from the lives of select members of the BPP will be used to illustrate the rooted themes for black activism in youth between the genders.

### **Introduction**

The leaders of tomorrow are being formed today. The leadership that is built today has to stand on the foundations of the past. The stakes for this building are raised when it comes to black youth. Society can influence the identity of a black person extremely positively or negatively depending on what is seen heard and understood. Not every experience is positive, however, it is worth examining what the positive and negative experiences are, which can develop a black boy or girl into a leader. With the rise of black activism in the Black Lives Matter movement and presidential elections in 2008, a major question that has been asked is who is leading these movements regarding gender and for what reasons.

### **Literature Review**

When looking at the order of the literature, the intention was to look at activism and engagement for all youth with the work of Pancer et. al, and progressively get more specific to then see what the important factors for black youth were in the work by Hope et. al. Finally, since there is minimal applicable research for activism in specifically black boys and girls (Hope 467), the final literature looks at major works about each group, and what affects each one's mindset/behavior.

The first level of looking at what is important for activism comes from Michael Pancer and Mark Pratt's study on what distinguishes the activists from the uninvolved. This study looked at adolescents between the ages of 16 and 22. They created a scale called the youth inventory of involvement which asked them questions like "how likely are you to participate in a political campaign" and how likely are you to do community service and based off their answers (scaled from 1-4) this provided a score for each student. These scores were then used to put students into clusters based on their "activism score." They were placed into Activists, Helpers, Responders and Uninvolved.

These were not the only things that the survey measured, however. They used the youth social responsibility scale, which looked at responsibility, the ego identity status, the Lamborn et al Scale and the self-esteem scale. They used these 5 scales to then compare back to the groups to see which ones had the strongest associations (Pancer 745). With the data they had, they found that the most common thing for the activists was the theme of authoritative parenting. This was largely defined as seeing their parents as warm and strict. The next most common things were having higher self-esteem and having a more developed identity (Pancer 751).

Hope et al. conducted a study about what is important for civic engagement for black youth. The participants in the study were around the same age as in the Pancer and Pratt study, and Hope looked at what some of the key activators are for them. What they found was that one of the key activators for black youth was having a critical understanding of the world they were in (Hope 461). This means not only seeing the injustices in the world but having a structural understanding of why inequality exists. A key aspect of this also found that political cynicism had no major effect on how engaged students are (Hope 463). When the youth were prepared to interrogate injustice and inequality, there's a higher chance of them wanting to enact system change. This also meant that having a quality civic education is critical (Hope 462). It was found that when students have a good understanding of their government and history, things become clearer in why things are structured the way they are in American society so they can actively engage with it. This leads to the final critical piece for black students, which is political efficacy. This was understood as the feeling of being able to make a difference in politics (462).

For black boys and men, there are a plethora of things that were influential in development and growth when it comes to life and specifically life as someone active in their community. Much of this had to do with one's matriculation through school. Washington mentions in their article that black men are the least matriculated out of any identity group (20). This is critical because for many, college campuses end up being the training grounds for many activists. Black men typically have a lack of role models for them. The population of black men has been reduced to mass incarceration, violence, and drug abuse, and without them in the community, black boys had significantly more challenging times finding positive influences in the community that can relate to them. For black boys, the schooling process can be particularly disenfranchising, most teachers are white, and an even higher percentage are women, so they are likely to have their assertiveness deemed as aggression in class (22). This "aggression" is usually harshly punished, and it turns many black boys away from continuing in the same way. They are more likely to be diagnosed as mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed, and more likely to be put in the slower classes. The feeling criminalized usually turns out in them talking out in class more and the cycle increases upon itself. This idea can lead to them seeing school as feminine (25).

The last thing is that black boys are how they will respond to this combination of things that affect their lifestyle. Washington continues with the fact that because black boys feel like they have a low sense of control, especially in the classroom, they will resort to putting their energy into things that they can control. This could manifest in being the class clown or looking to be a sports team.

For black girls' women, some of the challenges are the same as men, but with increased risk, and consequences. Patricia Hill Collins noted how outstandingly high the pressure was on black girls and women to perform service work (46). Although it may not necessarily be private domestic work. Black women are still overrepresented in low paying service jobs like nursing assistants or fast food employees. This is all before considering the unpaid physical and emotional labor of running a household. Many black girls and women must help out with the childbearing and raising process, even if they are not mothers. When looking at identities, black women are placed on the "other" half of binaries, which make them inherently seen as subordinate. An example of this is how they are black as compared to white, female compared to male, emotional compared to reasonable, and body-centered compared to mind centered (70). This "othering" leaves them subject to exploitation, particularly sexual. While facing exploitation, black girls and women have a challenge when it comes to beauty standards. Black men are criticized when they are too black, but because they are male, not as much of their identity and self-worth are hinged on it (89). This is different for black girls and women because of the increased emphasis society has on physical attractiveness for all women.

In summary, a few findings from the literature stood out. Parental guidance is the strongest influence in the Pancer et al. is understandable, and at the same time should not be looked over. While still noting that having an identity of self and values/ideas is critical. Hope et. al. illustrated that "knowing the government is bad" is not enough, and the combination of political efficacy, civic education, and an understanding of structural inequality is important. Washington's article highlighted that for black boys, most issues are centered around what may or may not take place in the classroom. Collins offered a different perspective on how black women have to take on their role as black and as women in the world, particularly with them being hypersexualized and what challenges they may face in their double marginalized identity.

These readings show a few rooted themes that come up for both men women and may give room to some differences between black men and women. Parental relationships will be used as the first theme due to its strongest association in Pancer et. al. Education and school perception will be used in the second theme because of Hope et. Al.'s reference to civic education as well as Washington and Collins point to it was relevant in what may or may not be given to black boys and girls. The themes that will be used for analysis will be parental/guardian relationships, education, identity, and understanding of inequality. These four themes will be looked at through the lives of 5 leaders in the BPP.

### **Analysis**

The leaders that were associated with the BPP were chosen due to their significance in African-American culture and the history of the United States. Their individual ideologies, as well as those of the party, have served as the foundation. The party was originally formed to combat police brutality and racism during tumultuous times in the 1960s.

Inspired in part by the teachings of Malcolm X, the group sought to protect black people and empower and lead them to have their own rights. Their free breakfast programs and other grass-root things like clinics were crucial for the people they were around. In their bold approach to stand against, police brutality, the Black Panther Party was known to be armed and willing to fight back when attacked or when people in the community were attacked. Their defense created alarm in the national government which led them to launch a counterintelligence strategy to cause distrust and dismantle the Black Panther Party. Many of the party's leaders did not make it through the time period. Most of the others were exiled or put in jail for extended periods of time.

The leadership in the party is important today because they fought through the toughest of times in the party. Their work stands out to this day as essential to the formative ideas of black activism and social justice movements around the world. For this study, we want to find out how well these concepts applied to the lives of these activists. Elaine Brown was the chairwoman for the Black Panther Party for self-defense, following the flee of Huey Newton. She played a major role in the development of the party's major community service programs, and as chairwoman, she developed the liberation schools.

*Huey Newton* was a co-founder of the Black Panther Party and for a long time its minister of defense. He held that position until 1974 when he fled to Cuba. After returning to the United States, Newton got his doctorate degree from UC Santa Cruz. Newton was killed in 1989.

*Angela Davis* was an associate of the party as an assistant professor at UCLA. She became a household name when she was put on the FBI's most-wanted list for allegedly kidnapping and murdering a judge. Her trial was a profile with people across the country putting together money for bail. Davis was later found not guilty. Bobby Seale was also a co-founder of the Black Panther Party and served as chairman until he left the Party in 1974 due to dispute with Huey Newton.

*Assata Shakur* was involved with the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California and Harlem, New York. In New York, she organized the free breakfast program as well as other programs benefiting the community. After being convicted for murder and later acquitted, she escaped prison and was granted political asylum in Cuba. The four main themes chosen were:

#### *Parental and Guardian Relationships*

Pancer et. al. found that the most strongly associated variable with engagement is authoritative parenting. A way that it could be commonly understood is "warmth and strictness" this could be understood as making sense because a parent or guardian has an active guidance role for their child but does not get too close to them whereas the child does not take them seriously. The parents can provide enough reasoning for punishment.

A clear example of this would be in the case of Elaine Brown and her mother Dorothy. Dorothy was a single mother and worked relentlessly at a dress press making factory. She fought hard for Elaine to get into a "good" school to start her childhood off and maintained a hard stance on how important grades were. This stuck with Elaine as she maintained high grades throughout her academic career. At home, Dorothy and Elaine slept in the same bed.

Bobby Seale grew up in a household with two parents, but they were very different. Bobby's father, George was a carpenter and was physically abusive towards, Bobby, his siblings, and his mother. "In Lonely Rage", Seale cited many times where his father would come home and yell at him over things that at the time seemed pointless, like chewing loudly at the table.

### Education and School Perception

Many of the activists were pushed strongly by their parents to perform in school. The outcomes of the push varied greatly. Huey Newton notably disliked school at an early age, due to the teachers belittling him and making him feel less valuable than the white children. By the time he hit third grade, Huey and his friends figured out how to manipulate the white children to do the work for them. Huey did not know how to read because he spent so much of his time fighting with teachers. He knew that the problem was the school system; he had no problem with learning. Bobby Seale also believed that school was not necessary for him and he spent his early teens cutting class often.

### Identity Development

Assata Shakur shows the clearest situation of identity development and where someone is in the world. She articulates how much she struggled with being poor and black—and having to deal with the overt racism of southern white people while also battling with the covert racism of white ones. She realized because she was a young black woman, people would think she was older than she was and sexualize her. Grandparents were big on personal respect..."who's better than you?" nobody. Was not allowed to play with the alley cats/kids. One thing that was drilled into her head since birth though was that in the education realm, black people were just as good as the whites. Most fights came from being called to black or ugly or something related to anti-blackness, and that's what they believed, being called black was the worst insult in the book. She saw in junior high that all the black kids got put in the slow classes, she loved English and history. She was very aware not to get pregnant when a guy would pressure her to give him some in middle school. Huey Newton credits his father as one of the strongest influences in his life. His father was the ultimate figure he could look up to. Huey called him strong, unafraid of speaking back to white people, and morally sound. The time he spent ministering had a large effect on the value system he had as well. His father's explicit preoccupation with paying bills was also a formidable trait that Huey looked to not have.

### Understanding Social Inequality

Angela Davis grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, and went to an all-black elementary school due to segregation. Her family had modest financial stability because both of her parents were employed. As young as second grade, Angela noticed the severity of certain people's situations: at lunchtime, some would be made to sit outside the lunchroom and eat. This plain contrast was something that stood out clearly in the life of Elaine Brown as well. Elaine grew up in North Philadelphia and spent a lot of her childhood in government housing. She could see early that there were a lot of other black people that had a better life than her. As she matriculated through school, she also saw the extent to which white people had "good lives" of luxury.

## **Discussion**

Social justice work does not look like what it did in 1960, but it does still require black men and women that are dedicated, resilient, understanding and smart. The patterns of what shapes black activists should be cultivated in a healthy way so that there is more positive black leadership that can advocate for people fighting all types of inequality, whether it's sexual, racial or economic. This study aimed to identify major themes for activism in the past to see if they possibly may carry through to now.

A noticeable thing from looking at the lives of these activists is the importance they took to certain things in their development. There were key moments in the process that more closely related to the identity development of women that lead to their activism, in particular, the encounters of sexual assault and violence for both Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown. Their experiences had a marked effect on their lives because they had to advocate for themselves as both as black people and women. Their fight was taken with a stage of seriousness earlier even though it was not fully developed.

During second-wave feminism in the early 1960s, the phrase "the personal is political" was popularized. It was a call to acknowledge that the rights of women were being politicized and controlled by men even though it fell within.

This study has shown that for women, understanding that their personal identities are political plays a critical role in their upbringing and activism. Even if it is not large-scale political activism, they know they must defend and advocate for themselves as women and as black people. This study could provide a basis for further study into contemporary examples of the association between gender and activism for men and women. It was conducted with a male/female binary. It does not consider people that are transgender or in different places along the gender spectrum.

This study also focuses on a limited number of leaders, and their upbringing may not be representative of their gender. Someone that is continuing in this area of study should look at how interpersonal relationships affect black activism. There is a plethora of information about black activism and this study serves as an example of how much that can still be unpacked in relation to gender.

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