Keeping the Faith: Psychosocial Correlates of Activism Persistence into Middle Adulthood

Stephen I. Abramowitz¹ and Alberta J. Nassii

Received July 27, 1981

This study was conducted to determine certain ideological, personological, lifestyle, and familial correlates of activism persistence into middle adulthood. Almost 15 years following their arrest for participation in the Free Speech Movement, 30 former Berkeley activists responded to a political activity scale and measures selected to tap variables in each of the contextual domains. Although persisters did not differ from nonpersisters with respect to most lifestyle dimensions, they were distinguished by more radical beliefs, stronger repudiation of Protestant ethic values, and a stronger family legacy of social concern. The results provide more support for theories of activists' adult development based on notions of generational continuity, rather than generational rebellion.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of student activism on the nation's campuses some 15 years ago focused immediate attention on the developmental and personological differences between protest youth and their more conventional college contemporaries. As the movement responded to an increasingly complex array of issues and the ranks of protesters swelled to include per-

¹Associate Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis, School of Medicine. Received his Ph.D. from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Major interests are politics and personality and politics and clinical psychology.

²Visiting Assistant Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis. Received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Davis. Major interests are adult development and health psychology.
sons of diverse social and political backgrounds, observers came to ac-
knowledge the oversimplification inherent in monolithic conceptions of
political activists. In the time that has elapsed since the height of the activist
phenomenon, we have once again been content to limit ourselves to a set of
narrow questions about the fate of the 1960s protesters. Debates over the
psychopathology or psychological giftedness of student activists have resur-
faced in controversies about their wholesale cooptation or enduring com-
mitment. The popular media have contributed to our tunnel vision with dra-
matic reports of the religious and political conversion of a couple of move-
ment celebrities. When these accounts are taken to characterize the adult
development of a generation of protesters, one shudders at the gap between
media imagery and social reality (Gitlin, 1980). This paper reports empirical
data suggesting that some former radicals survived the accommodation to
middle class adulthood, and that certain family values and psychosocial
attributes distinguish these individuals from their counterparts who tended
to withdraw from the political arena.

Early dissatisfaction with the monolithic view of student protesters
was stimulated by the coexistence of two competing theories of activist per-
sonality development. Psychoanalytic writers and others in the generational
discontinuity school ascribed radical protest to "unresolved Oedipal con-
flicts wherein the adolescent is rebelling against the parent, either directly or
symbolically" (Block, 1972, p. 333). Displacing familial conflict onto
society and the world, young radicals were believed to be "acting out" intra-
psychic conflict in the political arena. By contrast, those in the generational
continuity camp inferred a convergence of activist and parental values from
eyearly findings. Their socialization formulation predicted considerable agree-
ment between activist youth and their parents, and a predisposition to ac-
tivism based on "rational processes applied in critical examination of con-
temporary society and a moral commitment to societal change" (Block,
1972, p. 333).

A pair of collective psychobiographies (Keniston, 1965, 1968) intensi-
fied the controversy, but also suggested that a resolution might lie in
articulating differences within the subculture of disaffected youth. Keniston
found that his alienated and uncommitted sample had for the most part
rejected parental values. Committed radicals, on the other hand, identified
with their parents and were concerned with "living out expressed but unim-
plemented parental values" (Keniston, 1968, p. 399).

The most influential empirical research on the comparative develop-
mental and personological profiles of various subgroups of unconventional
youth was reported in a series of collaborative studies conducted at Berke-
ley's Institute of Human Development. These investigations were based on a
large data pool collected from various samples of activists and nonactivists