


## Article

# “We Can Transform This, We Can Change This”: Adolescent Sociopolitical Development as a Catalyst for Healthy Life-Span Development

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**Abstract:** In the late 1970s, adolescents in East Harlem, New York, participated in a program called the Youth Action Program where they worked collectively to address systemic issues causing inequities in their communities (e.g., inequities in housing and education). In the current study, we integrate the sociopolitical development framework with life-course health development to explore how participation in the program shaped adolescents’ skills and capacities for social transformation in ways that were health-promotive and informative for life trajectories. Data included retrospective interviews and member-checking focus group data of 10 former Youth Action Program members (current  $M_{age} = 63$ ; 45% female; 55% male) from predominantly Black and Latinx backgrounds. We used reflexive thematic analysis and adopted a case study approach to highlight how participants’ adolescent experiences of sociopolitical development and resistance against oppressive circumstances propelled healthy life-course development. Specifically, participants were able to establish healthy lives through four health-promotive sociopolitical developmental processes: questioning the system not the self; carving out alternative spaces and pathways; building agency in a dehumanizing society; and finding purpose through committing to social change. Our study suggests that contemporary youth organizing programs can incorporate sustaining practices including the careful vetting and training of adult staff, pursuing tangible opportunities to create change, and embedding youth voice and leadership into programmatic structures to encourage healthy development via sociopolitical development.

**Keywords:** adolescents; sociopolitical development; life-course health development; opportunity structures; youth programming; sustaining practices; retrospective interviews



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## 1. Introduction

*“It’s sad that we, as Spanish and Black children, put ourselves down. But it’s not our fault. It’s a reflection of how society operates. It can be changed. We are already involved in changing it, because we understand it, and we care.”—Johnny Rivera at age 19*

In the USA, marginalizing systems of racism and classism pervade and shape youth development, including how young people engage sociopolitically and their sense of health and ability to thrive [1–3]. For youth marginalized by race and class, challenging societal oppressions can be conceived as a healthy response to coping with the stress of systemic injustice and dehumanizing ideologies [2,4,5]. While challenging societal oppression can foster a sense of agency for social change and healing from oppressive experiences, this process can evoke health challenges like stress and anxiety as youth contend with the magnitude of structural forces [4,6]. Indeed, extant research highlights both the positive and negative linkages between challenging oppression and social emotional and mental

health for adolescents [7]. However, particularly unclear in the literature is how adolescents' experiences of challenging oppression translate into longer term sociopolitical trajectories and health impacts [7]. For instance, can youths' sense of agency and the ability to enact change in one's community transcend the adolescent period and foster lifelong sociopolitical engagement in health-promotive ways? In pursuing this question, we conceptualize the descriptor "health-promotive" within an inequitable society as youths' ability to develop assets to resist oppressive forces in ways that fortify their sense of self and ability to thrive [2]. As such, our study aimed to qualitatively analyze the retrospective reflections of the long-term (i.e., 45 year) life trajectories of Black and Latinx individuals who were deeply engaged in a youth program as adolescents in East Harlem, New York, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In doing so, we sought to uncover the possibilities and promises of adolescent sociopolitical development in spurring healthy life-span development.

### 1.1. Sociopolitical Development Theory

Rooted in Black liberation psychology, sociopolitical development (SPD) theory proposes that personal and collective liberation from structural oppression can occur through youths' development of: analysis of oppression (i.e., critical social analysis), sense of individual and collective efficacy to enact change (i.e., political efficacy), and commitment to and engagement in sociopolitical action to challenge and transform oppressive systems (i.e., sociopolitical engagement) [3,4,8]. The goal of SPD is a liberated society, free from structures of domination, where all individuals and communities can thrive psychologically, economically, and socio-politically [3].

SPD is linked to positive developmental outcomes [9], especially for youth of color, including education [10] and career development [11]. Research on adolescents' SPD and health has focused on critical social analysis and sociopolitical efficacy [7], suggesting that critical social analysis coupled with sociopolitical efficacy and/or sociopolitical engagement promotes mental and socioemotional health [12,13]. Other research, albeit with young adults, suggests that SPD is associated with heightened levels of stress and anxiety [14,15].

Though limited, some research has investigated the enduring ramifications of youth SPD, finding that adolescent sociopolitical engagement is associated with adult political and civic action and careers in service professions [16–18]. One seminal study examined the experiences of 330 predominantly white applicants to the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer project (212 project participants and 118 individuals who "no-showed" for the project) and found that twenty-five years later, participants were more politically involved because of their experience in the summer of 1964 [16]. Another study found that young women who protested the Franco dictatorship in Spain in the 1970s reported that youthful activism played a key role in forming long-term political and social commitments. Young women's experiences in youthful activism were associated with mainly positive emotions and a sense of empowerment in adulthood [19]. In another case, a longitudinal study of Black youth in an impoverished Chicago neighborhood in the 1980s who participated in a youth development program focused on health, relationship building, and educational support reported better educational and financial outcomes roughly 16 years after participation as compared to their peers not involved in such programming [20]. Across studies, however, much of the extant work is quantitative, limiting our knowledge of the lived experience and potential mechanisms that undergird long-term relations between SPD and health [21]. More qualitative research in this area can help to illuminate the multiple ways that SPD influences health over time by privileging the perspectives and voices of the individuals themselves. Therefore, the current study seeks to qualitatively build upon findings regarding the long-term impacts of participation in youth programming and activism on health by examining how older adults of color describe the lifelong influence of their adolescent experiences in an SPD program.

### 1.2. *The Role of Opportunity Structures*

The role of contextual supports (e.g., the structure and environment of youth organizations) may be a key factor in fostering and differentiating health-promotive SPD from SPD experiences that negatively challenge health and wellbeing [7,22]. Opportunity structures are structured spaces like classrooms and afterschool programs where young people are supported in fostering their critical social analysis and ability to act against marginalization [4,23]. Research shows that SPD-focused youth programming outside of school (i.e., afterschool, summer programming) can have meaningful benefits for youths' ability to challenge oppressive circumstances [24–26]. Adults play a key role in these spaces as facilitators, allies, and resources who can help youth develop their knowledge and analytic skills to address injustices [27,28]. At the same time, it is essential that youth voice and power stay at the forefront, and youth must be seen as capable and knowledgeable [4,26]. Indeed, what may advance health-promotive adolescent SPD experiences is an organizational climate wherein youth are seen, heard, respected, and cared for.

Opportunity structures often exist with organizations (e.g., a school, a nonprofit organization), and they always operate within a broader sociopolitical climate. These broader contexts also influence adolescents' experiences within specific programs [4,26]. For example, a particular sociopolitical event like a presidential election or global protest movement can inform how young people mobilize and deepen their SPD within opportunity-structures [29]. We thus situate participants' experiences in YAP within the broader context of East Harlem (which we expand on below).

### 1.3. *Sociopolitical Development in a Life-Course Health Development Lens*

Given that prior scholarship suggests SPD can be health-promotive for young people facing systemic oppression [2], we seek to further center SPD within the lens of health. Western medicine has traditionally focused on health as the absence of illness at an individual level [30]. The life-course health development framework is proposed as an alternative that focuses on the “abundance and complexity” of being healthy [30], viewing health as a developmental capacity informed by the ways in which individuals cultivate assets over the life course (e.g., emotional regulation, ability to perceive and process information) that promote adaptation to their multilayered developmental ecosystem [30,31]. This approach to health rests on seven principles: (1) health development, (2) unfolding, (3) complexity, (4) timing, (5) plasticity, (6) thriving, and (7) harmony [30,32]. We conceive healthy development as aligning with the personal and communal liberatory goals of SPD and herein focus on the principles of unfolding (i.e., health development evolves continuously over the lifespan and is shaped by experiences and contexts), timing (i.e., the sensitivity of health development to timing, including timing of exposure to contexts and experiences), and thriving (i.e., the promotion of survival and enhancement of wellbeing via optimal health development) [30].

An integration of the life-course health development principles of unfolding, timing, and thriving with SPD theory can offer a critical perspective on what it means to be “healthy” within an oppressive society built on hierarchy and marginalization [33]. First, the principle of unfolding read through SPD makes explicit how both microcontexts (e.g., youth-centered organizations) and macro structural dynamics (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, etc.) continuously shape developmental pathways of health and SPD. Second, the health principle of timing aligns with SPD, given how both highlight adolescence as a time of critical transition wherein youth evolve their societal roles [34] while also establishing health behaviors that impact their long-term trajectories [35]. Indeed, adolescence is a time for growing cognitive capacities to critically analyze society [36] and an opportune time to build a sense of efficacy and commitment to social change that can propel longer-term sociopolitical and health endeavors [17]. Thus, the health principle of timing within an SPD lens suggests that for adolescents, learning to critically read and navigate the world is central to healthy development. Finally, applying an SPD framework to the thriving principle expands the definition to consider the structural context in which thriving takes place.

In other words, through the integration of these two theories, thriving takes the form of collective and individual resistance against structural oppression, which we position as an integral feature of healthy development. Through addressing inequities and injustices via SPD, youth may be able to mitigate the trauma-inducing processes within oppressive social environments. For example, through securing funding for housing, youth can combat the trauma of being, or potentially being, unhoused. Such mitigation can ultimately increase the potential to thrive and induce health-optimizing developmental trajectories.

Finally, we recognize that other theoretical approaches and formulations exist that are similar in nature and seek to make central the role of structures of power in shaping development for youth facing marginalization. For instance, empowerment-based positive youth development (EMPYD) conceptualizes thriving for African-American youth in a positive youth development framework as a bidirectional process between active and engaged citizenship and healthy development [37,38]. We draw inspiration and guidance from this previous theory and research and hope to extend the conversation into additional fields ripe for further conceptualization and exploration (i.e., conceptualizing the linkages between SPD theory and life-course health development).

#### *1.4. The Youth Action Program*

The Youth Action Program (YAP) in East Harlem arrived out of funding from the Community Anti-Crime Program (CACP) of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration in 1978. Dorothy Stoneman, a resident and teacher in East Harlem, applied for and won a CACP grant to establish YAP within East Harlem. East Harlem in the 1970s was a predominantly Puerto Rican and under-resourced community threatened by gentrification [39], leading to challenges with housing and crime [40]. At the same time, reverberations of community activism in the 1960s for better living conditions and opportunities sustained community interest in social change [41].

YAP's mission was to cultivate youths' potential for leadership through asking young people what they loved about their community, what they would like to change or create, and then to support them in their changemaking. In YAP, youth spearheaded seven different initiatives, including a "Home Away from Home" for unhoused youth, a leadership school for teens, the Youth Action Restoration Crew to rehabilitate abandoned buildings, a Youth Patrol to prevent crimes in government-funded housing, an emergency telephone line called Hotline Cares to help peers in need of immediate assistance, a peer counseling project to offer youth therapeutic support, and a youth forum to lead the organization's advocacy and public policy initiatives (which included a Youth Policy Committee and various local and national fundraising efforts). YAP was widely successful, with 300 active youth participants by 1981, 75 of whom had been participating for at least one year [42]. The organization was at once centralized with a youth governance body but also flexible in that youth could participate in different initiatives that best suited their interests and motives. YAP staff were trained to reject adultism (i.e., attitudes and actions based on the belief that adults are better than young people and are expected to control and discipline them), and youth leadership was structurally integrated into the program [43].

All the while, YAP maintained a focus on supporting youth across the dimensions of their development, and named nurturance (i.e., efforts to build a sense of family or care among and for young people) and academic and personal development (e.g., building social skills) as key pillars of their organization's approach [43]. Thus, YAP was committed to fostering adolescents' SPD, sensitive to the multiple and reciprocal dimensions of youth development (e.g., youth are better going to be able to critically analyze social inequities if they feel like they are in a space where they belong, and they will be able to take more effective sociopolitical action if they can work collaboratively and kindly with one another).

As the projects gained momentum, YAP helped to facilitate youths' connections to their broader community through neighborhood-wide conferences in collaboration with other local organizations. Ultimately, YAP helped to create The East Harlem Youth Congress, wherein youth produced a "Youth Agenda for the Eighties". This vision undergirded a

subsequent campaign launched by YAP, the “Coalition for Ten Million Dollars” to seek city funding for several different community projects. Thus, YAP was largely successful in garnering community support, and youth participants had the opportunity to enjoy (hard-earned) success. Moreover, in response to the success of the Youth Action Restoration Crew and the shifting funding opportunities of the 1980s, YAP morphed into YouthBuild, a global organization that today serves young people around the world via construction, leadership, and educational training [44].

### 1.5. Theoretical Approach

To understand SPD as part of healthy development, we utilize a transactional ecological lens [3]. The transactional ecological lens arises from pioneering SPD research that illuminated how adult activists made sense of their SPD through a series of events unfolding within and across contexts [3]. Through this lens, transactions are considered memorable moments that constitute units of analysis; transactions accumulate and shape later thinking and behavior [3]. We use a transactional approach to consider how participants connected the sociopolitical endeavors of their life. In this approach, we also seek to center and amplify participants’ perceptions and meaning-making processes [3], harnessing their retrospective insights into the events that shaped their SPD and healthy development. Accordingly, we acknowledge that retrospective interviews are influenced by individuals’ memories and desires to create certain narratives, but we believe these characteristics to be essential to how participants want to understand their own life trajectories. Finally, we remain rooted in ecological context to account for the ways in which intrapersonal and environmental features collided in YAP to shape individuals’ experiences [3].

### 1.6. The Current Study

Using a qualitative approach guided by a transactional ecological lens, the current study integrates SPD and life-course health development lens to explore Youth Action Program members’ reflections of their adolescent and young adult SPD in the 1970s and early 1980s. The study is propelled by two research questions: (1) In what ways can SPD support healthy development across the life course? (2) Under what programmatic conditions could SPD support adolescents’ healthy development? We seek to advance efforts to create sustainable SPD across the life course, which can have healthful benefits for individuals while building more just and equitable communities.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

We interviewed ten former YAP members; nine of these participants agreed to also complete demographic surveys. Among the nine participants who completed surveys ( $M_{age} = 63$ ), four identified as female/women and five identified as male/men. Three participants identified their race/ethnicity as Black/African American, two as Latino/Hispanic, two as Puerto Rican, one as multiracial, and one as white. Two participants identified as first- or second-generation immigrants (meaning either they or one/both of their parents moved to the United States). Five participants described their families’ financial situation when they were young people as “we had a hard time buying the things we needed”, two reported “we had just enough money for the things we needed”, and two reported “we had no problem buying the things we needed, and could sometimes buy special things”. Eight of the interviewees were former adolescent participants who started in the program during mid to late adolescence, and two were former adult YAP staff members who joined after adolescence. Adolescent participants joined the program at different ages, spanning ages 13 to 18, and those who provided the age at which they ceased to participate reported between 18 and 20 years old. Participants varied in how long they were involved in the program and we did not collect start/finish dates, but all ten described multi-year involvement. The adolescent participants and adult staff were involved in a broad range of YAP programs but were largely connected by participation in YAP’s youth leadership initiatives through the Young Policy Committee, program fundraising, and/or Youth Congress (See Table 1).



**Table 1.** Sample demographics.

Participant	Current Age	Role in Program	Age during Participation	Ethnic/Racial Background	Gender	Family Financial Situation When Participating in Program	Forms of Participation in Program	Current (or Former If Retired) Professional Role
Chantay	59	Participant	13–18 years old	Black	Female	We had no problem buying the things we needed, and could sometimes buy special things	Youth Policy Committee; Youth Planning Committee; Youth Congress; involved across YAP programs (especially in Homes Away from Home)	Social services program director and grief coach
Esther	75	Staff	Mid-adulthood	Multiracial	Female	We had just enough money for the things we needed	Youth and Elders (outgrowth of Youth Patrol)	Youth Action Program staff; long-term community organizer in East Harlem
James	70	Staff	24 years old–still involved today	White	Male	We had a hard time buying the things we needed	Youth Restoration Crew; involved in fundraising and Youth Policy Committee	Youth Action Program staff; career leading YouthBuild (the global program developed out of YAP)
Johnny	61	Participant	15–19 years old	Hispanic/Latino *	Male	We had a hard time buying the things we needed	Youth Restoration Crew; Youth Policy Committee (Chairman)	Career in hospital community and government affairs; ongoing political and community involvement
Kendal	–	Participant	14–unknown years old	–	–	–	Hotline Cares; Youth Action Program fundraising (e.g., Coalition for a Million)	Non-profit leader
M. Gladman	64	Participant	15 -unknown years old	African American	Male	We had just enough money for the things we needed	Youth Patrol; Youth Policy Committee	Career in public housing; semi-retired and serving in private housing organizations

Table 1. Cont.

Participant	Current Age	Role in Program	Age during Participation	Ethnic/Racial Background	Gender	Family Financial Situation When Participating in Program	Forms of Participation in Program	Current (or Former If Retired) Professional Role
Millicent	62	Participant; young adult staff	17–unknown years old (but cited at least 5 years of participation)	Puerto Rican	Female	We had no problem buying the things we needed, and could sometimes buy special things	General participation in program; Youth Policy Committee; young adult staff of the Shared Youth Leadership Program and at Home Away from Home	Did not disclose specific career but discussed integrating YAP experiences into work with youth; current physically disabled
MK	60	Participant	18–unknown years old	Black/African American	Female/Cis	We had a hard time buying the things we needed	Home Away from Home board member; Youth Policy Committee; participated in Outward Bound programs facilitated by YAP Youth Patrol; Youth Policy Committee; (wanted to work at YAP as young adult staff but no positions available; worked as job developer at another community organization as a young adult for 2 years)	CEO/Founder of a 30-year-old consulting firm that works with nonprofits
Reynold	53	Participant	15–18 years old	Latino	Male	We had a hard time buying the things we needed	worked as job developer at another community organization as a young adult for 2 years)	Retired police officer; non-profit leader focused on youth mental health
Saint	63	Participant; young adult staff	16–20 years old	Puerto Rican *	Male	We had a hard time buying the things we needed	Hotline Cares; Youth Congress	Educational professional; advisor to youth programs

Note. \* Second-generation immigrant origin. – Participant did not provide demographic information.

## 2.2. Procedures

The data used for this study were originally conducted as a program evaluation of the Youth Action Program led by Author 1. The program evaluation was initiated in 2023 by the former YAP co-founder, who sought to identify evidence of YAP's effects on youth development that would inform the creation of a contemporary version of YAP. As part of this evaluation, Author 1 completed a multi-step process to familiarize herself with YAP before beginning data collection and analysis. She initially met twice with the former YAP co-founder to discuss the organization and she read the 100-page detailed report of YAP in the CACP archives [42]. Author 1 then held an initial meeting with the YAP co-founder, six former YAP participants, and one former staff member to collectively reflect on participants' experiences in YAP. Author 1 worked collaboratively with the co-founder to identify initial guiding questions from this conversation, and these questions undergirded the development of the semi-structured interview protocol. As Author 1 developed the protocol, she sought feedback from former YAP members. She conducted an interview with one participant and made minor adjustments based on that participant's feedback. All interviews were conducted between June and August 2023.

Participants were recruited to the study via enduring personal relationships between the YAP co-founder and former YAP members. The co-founder was able to provide Author 1 with email addresses; Author 1 sent emails to a total of 14 people, and 10 people completed interviews. There were no noticeable demographic differences between the 10 people who chose to participate and the four who did not in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, or age. There were also no differences in terms of the depth of participation in YAP as reported by the co-founder who worked with them in the 1970s. All four had also been deeply involved in YAP as adolescents, and three of the four had maintained contact (some very consistent) with either the co-founder or YAP staff over the decades. At least one of the four was out of the country and one was experiencing great personal challenge during the period of interviews. Selection bias was inherent in this process, as we were able to reach only people who had chosen to maintain contact with the YAP co-founder. Interviews lasted between 30 and 70 min, with an average length of ~50 min. Many experiences and developmental outcomes were common among participants, suggesting saturation in the interview pool and interviews were stopped at 10 participants. While our participants were reflective of the predominantly Black and Latinx (specifically Puerto Rican) neighborhood where YAP operated, they likely represented some of the most involved participants, based on the fact that in 1981, 20 young people had been engaged for two or more years [42] (all of our participants were engaged for two or more years).

The interview protocol consisted of a series of questions chronologically posed to ask participants' to retrospectively describe and reflect upon their experiences before, in, and after YAP. In this way, participants were provided the opportunity to recount the "transactions" that comprised their sociopolitical journeys while remaining rooted in the ecological context of YAP.

Participants were first asked: "Let's begin with a little bit of background on what your life was like before YAP?" and then, "what initially led you to get involved in YAP?" From there, participants were asked about their experiences in YAP, including the projects they participated in, the successes and challenges they encountered while in YAP, and the relationships they were able to build in YAP. Next, participants were asked to reflect on how they may have experienced personal change through their YAP experiences, including potential changes in their sense of purpose, voice, motivation to make change, sense of capability to make change, and wellbeing. This part of the protocol was thus particularly rooted in participants' meaning-making and perceptions of their sociopolitical journeys. Finally, participants were asked to share about their life after YAP, including: "Can you tell me a bit about if and how you might have been involved in other community change efforts over your lifetime?" and "Looking back now, in what ways, if any, did YAP have a long-term effect on your life trajectory?" Again, the interviews focused more on participants' salient memories and experiences, and less on the specific dates/ages of their participation.



The interviews were transcribed using a professional transcription service and reviewed for quality. A post-interview survey was sent out to collect demographic data on each participant. The initial findings were shared in draft report form with all interviewees. The feedback interviewees provided in a final member-checking focus group was integrated into the findings (described below). Participants chose pseudonyms or were provided them if they declined to choose. This study consists of secondary analysis of the collected data initiated and led by the Youth Action Program. At the point of de-identifying the data for academic research, the Bates College Institutional Review Board declared the study exempt from review under Exemption Category 104(d)(2).

### *2.3. Qualitative Analysis*

The first author conducted all interviews. Throughout the interview process, the first author memoed on the interviews, reflecting on how YAP impacted participants' SPD. The identification of findings using reflexive thematic analysis [45] occurred in a two-part process. First, Author 1 developed an inductive–deductive codebook [46] to develop theory and data-driven codes and conducted preliminary analysis of the data to produce a program evaluation for YAP. Second, and in collaboration with Author 2, the data were re-analyzed through the lens of SPD as healthy development. Authors 3 and 4 reviewed the new findings. Both phases are described below.

In Phase 1, Author 1 first immersed herself in two transcripts to develop initial descriptive codes that were guided by the two research questions guiding the initial program evaluation: (1) In what ways do former members of the Youth Action Program perceive the short and long-term impacts of YAP participation on their life trajectories?; (2) What elements of the Youth Action Program do former members see as most salient for their development within and beyond adolescence and young adulthood? She iteratively “chunked” descriptive codes together and drafted an initial inductive codebook. She then reviewed two additional transcripts to aid in codebook refinement. At this point, descriptive codes were organized into superordinate themes accounting for theorized forms of civic development and novel observations from the data. Author 1 reviewed the working codebook with the YAP co-founder and systematically coded the data. At this point, only minor adjustments to codes were made. Upon completing the coding, Author 1 iteratively analyzed the coded data. She used analytic tools on a coding software platform to identify prominent codes. All data coded with the most prominent codes were pulled (e.g., “lifelong trajectories”). She reviewed the coded excerpts and began organizing the findings into broader themes. The findings were refined via a member-checking process (i.e., 2 h meeting) wherein five interviewees (including Authors 3 and 4) discussed and nuanced identified themes. As part of the member-checking, participants read the entire report drafted by Author 1. They offered minor suggestions to the initial findings, including a heavier emphasis on the importance of tangible youth-led projects (i.e., the importance that YAP facilitated community changes that participants could see and experience) and greater emphasis that adults did play a meaningful role in offering continuity and stability to youth-led projects. These suggestions were incorporated into the report and were integrated into the current study as well (see the salient programmatic elements in Table 2).

Table 2. Thematic overview.

Description of Phenomena		Exemplar Quotes	Programmatic Elements
<b>Metatheme: Learning to resist as healthy development</b>			
<b>Theme 1:</b> Questioning the system not the self	In a society that often blames individuals for their social conditions, adolescents learned to question the structure not themselves—which was integral to sustaining SPD and their healthy development.	<p>“One of the things, unfortunately in low-income communities, you have brilliant people. There’s brilliance in every individual, but it’s like, is it being nurtured? If it’s not nurtured, it’s almost like a muscle, and it can develop an atrophy. If you’ve never been told the potential you have, if you’ve never been told, “Wow, that was great. You did a great job.” You think that self-destructive behavior is based, what you basically should base your life on, because you don’t feel any self-worth or anything like that. So being around a group of young people who all were thinking a little different than the average person, and then having mentors within the group, within the Youth Action Program, to encourage us and to challenge us, and that’s what’s missing, all of the negativity that’s taking place perpetrated by young people.”—M. Gladman</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion circles wherein local and global current events were analyzed</li> <li>• Rejecting “adultism” and centering youth voice</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 2:</b> Carving out alternative spaces and paths	Through sociopolitical engagement within health-supportive opportunity structures, adolescents were able to overcome serious developmental obstacles, like substance abuse and potential gang affiliation. The opportunity structure of YAP specifically facilitated spaces of safety and access to adults who centered adolescents’ needs and gave them a space where they could heal and make positive life choices.	<p>“At that time I was really young. I was hanging on the streets. I was, you know, using marijuana, just mixing it up with the wrong type of crowd. And I tell people that all my life I try to help people in the community, especially young people. And I am like that because of Dorothy Stoneman and the Youth Action Program.”—Saint</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting developmental needs for safety, care, and choices away from drugs and alcohol</li> <li>• Creating a supportive and accepting environment where everyone felt included and respected</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 3:</b> Building agency in a dehumanizing society	Through feeling heard, and knowing they could take action to make a difference, adolescents turned feelings of “powerlessness” into efforts for change and “impact” as one participant put it. The agency gained during adolescence sustained civic engagement across the life course.	<p>“Agency. Yes. That’s the first thing it taught is you have agency in this community, in this society. It’s not just you being a powerless little clog being slapped around. You get together with other people and you go and you visit Angelo Del Toro, the Assemblyman, and he’s looking at people who all can vote at that point. We’re 18, 19, 20. It has an impact. The teaching of agency, I think, is a really, really important piece of their work.”—MK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal leadership opportunities (e.g., youth-led policy committee; ability to hire/fire staff)</li> <li>• Advocacy in city-wide and national politics</li> </ul>

Table 2. Cont.

	Description of Phenomena	Exemplar Quotes	Programmatic Elements
	Metatheme: Learning to resist as healthy development		
Theme 4: Finding purpose and committing to social change	A commitment to social change helped adolescents stay sociopolitically engaged across the life course. Through lifelong engagement, participants could continue challenging harmful systems and creating spaces for hope, community, and agency for themselves and others.	<p>“I think one of the uniqueness of Youth Action has been the ability to, and I don’t know if this is reflected as much in the report, but I know that the tangible thing that a young person leaves behind as a result of the work that they do, that to me was also a difference. . .It creates a memory for a young person that’s forever there of an accomplishment. And I think that that little thing really, really makes a big difference because I believe we all live based on our memories. We respond to things based on our memories. . . And on the community level, we provided more housing, advocated for more housing, and also, I think produced a lot of activists because beyond Youth Action Program is where I’d like to see a discussion. What goes beyond that on an individual level, on a community level.”—Kendal</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continuation of opportunities (i.e., participants were able to be involved in multiple initiatives over time)</li><li>• Projects that facilitated tangible impact in youths’ communities</li></ul>

In Phase 2, Authors 1 and 2 collaboratively re-analyzed the data in relation to the current study's research questions and then worked with Authors 3 and 4 to ensure that their experiences were accurately interpreted and portrayed. In this process, Author 2 independently reviewed the codebook and read and memoed on five of the transcripts. His analysis helped to corroborate Author 1's initial findings and together Authors 1 and 2 further iterated the themes using the individual interviews as the unit of analysis (as opposed to the program itself) and using transactional ecological model to focus on the ways in which participants made meaning of how they moved through their sociopolitical engagement via YAP participation. Together, Authors 1 and 2 decided to take a case study approach [47] to illustrate the thematic findings because (a) such an approach allowed us to show the complexity and richness in participants' accounts, (b) all of the participants described similar stories and trajectories, and (c) we wanted to harness the power of retrospective interviews to highlight SPD as a form of healthy development through showcasing the "transactions" [3,48] that led to thriving. We specifically chose Chantay and Johnny as the case studies after reviewing all 10 interviews as potential candidates and concluding that both Chantay and Johnny offered particularly detailed narratives that echoed and amplified the themes we identified across the broader sample. In accordance with rigorous case study approaches, we employed triangulation through data triangulation (e.g., a member checking focus groups) and investigator triangulation (e.g., research team from various backgrounds including former YAP participants) [49]. In terms of investigator triangulation, Authors 3 and 4, whose stories comprise the case studies, reviewed and refined the findings to ensure their experiences were properly reflected. To note, Authors 3 and 4 had previously participated in reading, reviewing, and refining the initial findings from the YAP report in Phase 1, so they were familiar with the larger data set from which the case-studies were drawn. While we remained sensitive to disconfirming data throughout these analyses, we did not identify participants' who shared experiences wherein SPD was health-challenging or circumstances wherein YAP challenged participants' health.

#### *2.4. Positionality Statement*

Rather than approach this work from a standpoint of objectivity, we understand that our personal positions within systems of power influence how we collect, interpret, and present the data in this study [50]. To intentionally engage with positionality and reflexivity, we continually asked ourselves during the research process: whose perspectives are we centering? Whose voices are unheard in this space? How do our values and positions inform our interpretations of the data?

This reflection also varied by our own positionalities. Authors 1 and 2 are young white scholars who are invested in unlearning and challenging white supremacy in both their personal and professional lives. Author 1 grew up and lives in Maine and works as an Assistant Professor of Psychology where she mainly studies youth civic engagement. Author 2 grew up in Michigan and lives in Illinois where he studies as a graduate student in psychology and focuses on examining how white supremacy shapes human development. As Authors 1 and 2 engaged in this study, we considered how we could redress biases and blindspots arising from racially-privileged perspectives through collaborative research. We used member-checking, joint authorship with former YAP participants, and internal conversations to deepen our understanding of participants' lived experiences. Author 3 enters this work as a long-term East Harlem resident. Author 3 is an African American female, former YAP participant, and current Grief Coach who works to support and help to treat those with substance-use disorders. Author 4 was born and raised in East Harlem and identifies as Hispanic/Latino. Author 4 was also a former YAP participant and has since been heavily involved in community work to support the education and wellbeing of young people. Both Authors 3 and 4 represent the case studies that we present in this current manuscript. Thus, in this work, the authors collectively and deliberately sought to challenge and decenter the prized notion of "distance" in psychological research, or the dichotomy of "researcher" and "participant", by building a team that resisted traditional

boundaries of who gets to “know”, who get to be a “scholar”, and ultimately, who gets to report the research.

### 3. Results

In reference to our first research question (in what ways can SPD support healthy development across the life course?) we identified four themes: (1) questioning the system not the self; (2) carving out alternative spaces and paths; (3) building agency in a dehumanizing society; and (4) finding purpose and committing to social change. Via our case study approach, we italicize each theme as it appears throughout the narratives. Meanwhile, to provide evidence that these same themes emerged across participants, our thematic overview table includes sample quotes from participants not featured in the case studies (Table 2).

In reference to our second research question, (under what programmatic conditions could SPD support adolescents’ healthy development?), we note the specific programmatic elements of YAP that supported these processes, namely the internal structures (e.g., centering youth voice and power within the program) and external opportunities facilitated through the program (e.g., opportunities to advocate elected officials; see Table 2 for review).

Given the nature of our sample, we do not seek to position SPD as a universal “antidote” to oppression [51]. Rather, we seek to center how the participants we interviewed made meaning of their experiences, with implications for considering the opportunity structures that encourage and foster health-promotive SPD. Further, in sharing these narratives, we do not mean to suggest that SPD does not beget unique challenges that can be harmful or taxing for youth, especially those youth from more marginalized backgrounds. These narratives do, however, showcase the potential of the lifelong impacts of SPD during adolescence, especially under conditions of humanization, support, and agency.

#### 3.1. Chantay Case Study

Chantay’s narrative powerfully demonstrates the liberatory and enduring nature of SPD during adolescence. Prior to participating in YAP, Chantay described herself as “numb” to the world around her. She reflected: “I don’t think my life... I don’t think I necessarily considered my life. I think that I had gone numb. I didn’t own my own life”. In high school she became involved in YAP, where she recalled her entry into the program, when the director explicitly asked her, “If you had the support of older people, what would you do?”. Indeed, a fundamental component of YAP was that it subverted the traditional power structure between adults and youth by recognizing and uplifting young people’s agency and voice. Chantay described this initial transaction and question, and her experiences being listened to in the program, as transformational; it was a turning point in her SPD. Importantly, her reflection is also colored by her positionality as a Black woman in a society structured by white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and patriarchy; being asked what she wanted (and to be listened to) was not an experience she was familiar with:

It was a contradiction to everything that I knew and understood about the relationship between adults and young people, and between people of color and the world or formal structures. I had both a sense of power and responsibility that was unfamiliar. Adults listening to me was sort of foreign. An environment that was not punitive was sort of foreign. An environment in which I could go and speak to adults and say, “you owe accountability to me for the role you play in my community, even though I can’t vote”, was huge. And to have people pay attention and to invite us to be parts of steering committees and to be able to speak to them about our perception of what we needed to see in our community, in terms of education, in terms of jobs, in terms of recognition of us as people and not predators. So, it was very empowering to me, it was a very different way to think. Thinking you have power as opposed to as a victim or even worse, invisible, I liked being part of the conversation.

The above narrative showcases how *cultivating youths' agency and voice in a dehumanizing society* is healthy development; it is a fundamental component of what it means to thrive in contexts of inequality. As Freire [52] argues, there is no such thing as giving people of color a “voice” because a voice is not a gift “it is a democratic right. A human right” (pg. 30). YAP did not “give” youth of color a voice, it listened and elevated young people’s voices that, in Chantay’s words, were traditionally not “part of the conversation.” YAP was a unique context, an opportunity structure, that contrasted the systems and spaces youth often traversed, which Chantay described as “punitive”, inattentive, and dismissive. YAP disrupted such conditions by providing a space for youth to take an active role in their communities, to change and challenge “punitive” systems and structures, and to demand accountability from those in power. In other words, it cultivated youths’ sense of agency and empowerment to work towards meaningful social change.

Chantay also described the humanizing space of YAP *as an alternative path*, one which was “uplifting”, “nurturing”, and “safe”. She describes this aspect of the program as helping her to confront obstacles in her own life (e.g., alcoholism):

I had some real issues with alcohol back then or the beginnings of some real issues. . . and I tried to keep it under control at YAP. And those people that did notice, who were staff, addressed it. . . And what I did was I got involved with as much as possible. And I think the people around me who saw that I was struggling, said, “Hey, we got this going on over here. We think you should be part of that”. And, “We have this going on over here, we think you should be part of that”. And ultimately, I think I felt cared about. And I had to make choices about how involved I was going to be with my alcohol, how involved I was going to be with my friends, how involved I was going to be with YAP, how effective I could be as a leader beyond a certain point, if I didn’t do something with the alcohol use. And ultimately, I got sober. And I got sober fairly young. Because what I got from YAP, if I didn’t get anything else, was hope. I got hope. And if a young Black girl could go and sit in the senator’s office and make demands and have some of those demands be met, I could not be an alcoholic. I just couldn’t.

Here, Chantay describes YAP as a humanizing environment that ultimately shifted her life path, giving her “hope” and believing that young Black girls, like her, could “make demands” and have “those demands be met”. In other words, YAP facilitated Chantay’s SPD, providing an alternate path to the alcoholism she describes struggling with during her teen years. Her narrative underscores the importance of the timing tenet in healthy development, in that adolescence is a critical period of development wherein youth need spaces that value, humanize, and nurture their voices and experiences. To be clear, the complexities of SPD may not always buffer and redirect one’s life path toward social justice; however, this is Chantay’s narrative. She found purpose and “hope” by taking an active role in her community, which was cultivated within the conditions and opportunity structure of YAP.

Moreover, through her participation in YAP, Chantay engaged in a critical analysis of the social structures around her. Doing so meant that Chantay began to *question the system and its oppressive ideologies rather than the self*. For example, Chantay said that she and her peers at YAP began to recognize that “stuff that was deficient, it wasn’t a deficiency in people, it was a deficiency in the resources people had to be in better positions”. She explicitly rejected the notion of individual “deficiency” and instead implicated the inequitable contexts and structures that engender disparities. This type of critical social analysis served as a turning point and facilitated Chantay’s resistance to think “outside of the box” and continually challenge the constraints imposed by oppressive societal forces. Chantay discusses how:

[YAP] taught me how to think outside of the box. I had been put in this box and then somebody said, “Oh, you don’t have to stay in there. Just tell us what you think. Tell us what you think this would be and how this would be better, and



how this... So, I know how to go, okay, those are things that seem like the only options. Are there other options?

This commitment to questioning and resistance did not end in adolescence, which serves to showcase the unfolding nature of SPD. Chantay's time in YAP instigated *a life committed to social change and disruption*. She described how after the program she has worked in a variety of social justice focused efforts:

After YAP, I've worked with people from that point on. I've worked with substance abusers. I've worked with people who have the HIV-AIDS virus. I've worked with people who are homeless. I've worked for the Department of Homeless Services. I've worked with women who have been incarcerated. I've worked with families of women who have been incarcerated or involved with the criminal justice system. So, it's just been this ongoing thing of there are people out there that I can be helpful to, if only to say, "Hey, what's going on with you and how can I help?" So, I think it's in my blood, it's in my system, it's in my values, it's in my perception of being humane humans.

Here, Chantay notes how YAP fundamentally shifted her "values" and her perception of what it means to be "humane humans". Her participation in the program during adolescence gave her the skills to critically read the social world, continually question and resist the "box" of society, and find "hope" for the future. It became in her "blood". This is evident in how Chantay described her current work and "responsibility" to her community. She now works as a grief coach, but described her role as more than only helping people cope with those whom they have lost:

I also believe through this whole idea of adultism and all the other isms, that over the course of our lives we lose parts of ourselves in order to assimilate and in order to be socially acceptable. And so, part of my work with people is to go back and find some of those pieces. To go back and find some of those dreams. To go back and to find some of those places where you didn't get what you wanted and re-parent yourself to really understand that it is difficult to maintain the innocence and love and trust and care that we're born with throughout our lives. And that we sometimes have to go back and we have to mourn that somebody told us that it wasn't okay to stand up for ourselves or that it wasn't okay to dream big or that it wasn't okay to be a lesbian or that it wasn't okay... So whatever the hell they thought wasn't okay, and then we lost that part of ourselves because we thought their thinking and their values superseded ours. And so all of that stuff that I got from YAP in one way or another, or working in a community or working with people.

Though SPD is often applied to make sense of youths' voices and experiences against oppression, Chantay's narrative showcased the ways in which SPD unfolded across the lifespan to facilitate a life of healthy development and thriving. Chantay, in large part due to the timing of YAP and her experiences in adolescence, continues to fight for social justice, helping people to "go back to find some of the pieces" they lost or that were damaged because of socialization into an oppressive society. This is Chantay's resistance or way of being in "community" with others.

### 3.2. Johnny Case Study

Like Chantay, Johnny's narrative also showcased the unfolding impact that SPD can have on health. As an early adolescent and "relatively good kid", Johnny bumped up against drug users and gangs in his family and neighborhood. He enrolled in a drug rehabilitation program for marijuana use because he was acting on the direction of the school dean, who said he could benefit from being in the drug rehab program because he was caught smoking in school. Yet, his mother frowned upon the idea of her son being in a program run by ex-addicts, she strongly encouraged him to leave the program, and so after about six months, he did and joined the Summer Youth Employment Program available to

low-income youth and was selected by YAP. The selection into YAP represents the first of a series of meaningful transactions within the opportunity structure of YAP that, unfolding over the period of adolescence, shaped Johnny's ability to thrive across his lifespan.

At the Youth Action Program, Johnny had the choice to join various programs (i.e., the Youth Congress, the 103rd Street Project, Youth Patrol at Johnson Houses NY-CHA development, and a construction program). What appealed to Johnny was the perception of a manly thing to do: work in construction. However, Johnny found his true calling within the community-organizing element of the program. He started by joining Friday meetings where, under the guidance of a young adult facilitator, he grappled with local and global events. The group would select a topic in the news and attempt to distill multiple issues to better understand the history and implications. Johnny described the "consciousness-raising" process of YAP:

It helped me to plug into the world peripherally, at least in an intellectual way, to understand what's happening. What's going on? Rather than just the immediate with only a superficial understanding. The immediate was not always so promising to say the least. And it was full of danger lurking and so on. And yet that's where we live. That's where we had to survive and make sure of that.

Here, we see how YAP facilitated Johnny's ability to ask "well, what's happening? What's going on?" building his critical social analysis within the opportunity structure of YAP and facilitated by supportive adults to *question and critique systems and structures*. In other words, he was able to build his critical literacy to question the systems that were shaping his life, a consciousness-raising process that engendered his sense of agency.

Indeed, Johnny's *sense of agency and voice* was nurtured in YAP. Johnny came to see that "this quiet guy has something to say". He worked with peers and adult allies as the first chairman of the Youth Policy Committee (YAP's youth leadership committee) and started to advocate elected officials for more community investments. They held conferences, authored position papers, and held politicians accountable, something that became "part and parcel of the experience" at YAP. Johnny recounted:

While at YAP, we were encouraged to contemplate what the world or our community would look like to help young people succeed. What would we need to achieve such a place, and what we would need to change? This brainstorming process facilitated an understanding of the timeline, resources, and how we would step up to build a better world/community.

He further reflected on how, via its programming, YAP was able to help youth realize "we had something to say" as the program helped "us think through issues" and "instilled in me a sense of trying to be outspoken". This stood in contrast to how Johnny described his experiences outside the program, in his broader context of East Harlem. For instance, he said that "nobody even asked me for my thoughts and I didn't exist anywhere. So I thought". Under conditions of voice and agency, young people, like Johnny, began to recognize how they can hold people "accountable" and be "outspoken" about the social conditions that affect their health and wellbeing. Agency and voice undergird what is thriving in a dehumanizing society that too often silences and restricts those who do not align with dominant white supremacist, patriarchal, and heterosexist norms.

At one point, Johnny was working on establishing a new municipal funding stream called the Campaign for 10 Million Dollars, which included rallies in front of city hall and speaking to individual elected officials. From this particular transaction, he remembered he pulled "an almost all-nighter" as he watched politicians negotiate. He explained it was "possible to observe and see that and, voilà, that's a budget and it's all real". He reflected:

And it's that concrete experience that deepened my civic understanding and my yearning for civic responsibilities that stay with me for life because there are many other stories thereafter about what I've done even after the Youth Action Program. I learned to believe that one can influence City Hall and more importantly, it is a civic responsibility to ensure quality programs.

Johnny noted here how, through YAP, his *commitment to social change and civic action* unfolded over time. Indeed, Johnny highlighted how he transformed from “a kid who came out of public housing, lived on welfare, nobody talked to him, he didn’t exist, no discussion of the future” to an 18-year-old who was “reading the New York Times in my public high school reading about the Contras in Nicaragua and what’s happening in the world”. YAP gave Johnny the tools and resources to thrive during the sensitive period of adolescence that shaped his lifelong endeavors to challenge the systems and structures that impacted him and his community.

Another way in which YAP facilitated Johnny’s healthy development was in how he described sociopolitical engagement *as an alternative path* that unfolded over his adolescence. As Johnny built his efficacy and took social action through adolescence, he describes how YAP made visible a different life:

If any of those men [in gangs] could have shown me some attention and put their arms around me and said, “I’ll look out for you”, that I may have been so appreciative that I may have just grown in that direction. And instead, I was fortunate to be exposed to wild ideas, but I took a liking to them and I took it to heart in some ways.

Later in the interview, he built on this idea by recognizing that “my reality does not have to be any of this”. Thus, through his participation in YAP, Johnny was able to chart a path that was meaningful to him, a path that was characterized by working against the forces that tried to marginalize him and his community. Thriving took the shape of both resilience and resistance against community divestment as well as the ability to choose health, and indeed these abilities are intimately interwoven. At the same time, Johnny acknowledged that “if I didn’t have my immediate issues addressed such as housing, food, clothing, school, maybe I would have been talking and looking at different things”. Thus, while Johnny did contend with systemic disadvantages, he also had a foundation of resources that allowed him to engage sociopolitically.

Ultimately, Johnny went on to take political and community leadership during his lifetime. In college, he noted how he felt “so much more ingrained” in social issues than his peers, and he ran for district leadership in the Democratic party. At the time of the interview, Johnny had served on several local community boards, including an organization for the developmentally disabled population, an organization to serve newly arrived immigrants to his community, and a community housing organization. Today, he still thinks about politics as a way to make a difference and believes the “good people who steer away from all of that because of misinformation and because of lack of exposure early in life”. To put it differently, Johnny believed that “early exposure really encouraged me to think about community and not let go”. His narrative makes visible how YAP served as an opportunity structure, a turning point in his life, that facilitated his ability to resist against the system and structures that impeded his sense of agency, voice, and wellbeing.

### 3.3. Long-Term Impact of YAP across Participants

Chantay and Johnny’s narratives serve as illustrious examples of how adolescent SPD supports healthy development within and beyond adolescence. To further underscore the power of well-supported adolescent SPD, we briefly describe other participants’ life trajectories and how they incorporated elements of SPD into their careers.

Participants built careers in public service including jobs managing public housing, leading equity-related consulting organizations, and serving in the New York Police Department (see Table 1 for full review). Several participants (Reynold, Kendal, and MK) started and ran their own nonprofits. Kendal explained how she continued to center youth voice and honor young people’s change-making abilities as a direct continuation of her time at YAP:

My time at Youth Action just led to years of working in youth development. I worked for other organizations with similar philosophies, definitely with young

people's voices always at the forefront, and engaging young people in decision making about their own lives and also what they could do for the community. It's been very, very powerful.

As Kendal continued to combat adultism into her own adulthood, she furthermore explained how she made it her mission to "raise consciousness" through her organization, because to her, "that's more powerful than giving me a grocery bag at a food pantry".

Meanwhile, some participants had retired and were continuing to engage in activities like serving on community boards and volunteering in their churches. For example, M. Gladman shared that he had "a successful career and finished off in upper middle management [in the public housing sector] and retired seven years ago", but that he is still "very much involved with public housing and serving the employees and the residents of public housing even today, but now it's through a private organization". In his interview, M. Gladman expressed an asset-based approach to his community work, as he articulated both the historical roots of public housing in New York and how he consistently approached his job as a fellow community member who understood that,

One of the things, unfortunately in low-income communities, you have brilliant people. There's brilliance in every individual, but it's like, is it being nurtured? If it's not nurtured, it's almost like a muscle, and it can develop an atrophy.

Thus, we see how M. Gladman was able to embed a critical lens into his service work that drew from historical analysis and from an understanding that systems may not cultivate contexts where individuals can thrive. He moreover saw it as his job to build relationships within this context to "always see myself as a grassroots community person, and really relating to people in such a way where they feel your authenticity, where you can have meaningful relationships". Both M. Gladman and Kendal both demonstrated how their approach to service was both structurally-critical and informed, but also person-centered and focused on building people's sense of empowerment—all of which were key aspects of their YAP experiences.

Finally, Reynold, a retired police officer, founded an organization focused on teens' growing mental health challenges that served about 100 young people at the time of the interview. Since retiring, Reynold described, "The teenagers love the program that we have. It reminds me so much, and I treat the young people now the way I was treated in the Youth Action Program. I think that's what continues to make us successful". While Reynold had clearly rooted his trajectory within a goal of service that stemmed from his own adolescent experiences witnessing violence and crime in his community, it is less clear in his narrative how he views his work from a structural lens. Thus, Reynold's case does provide some variety in participants' narratives, in that, at times, participants may have focused more on their goals of service rather than on challenging and changing systems.

The two young adult members of YAP (David and Esther) also continued on career-long paths of civic service, suggesting that YAP instilled in both youth and young adults the power of community organizing. Collectively, and impressively, participants cultivated their own healthy development while supporting the healthy development of the next generation.

#### 4. Discussion

This study explored how adolescent SPD can cultivate healthy development across the life course. Findings affirm that, under the conditions of youth-led and adult-supported spaces that encourage leadership and tangible community impacts, adolescent SPD can powerfully motivate lifelong healthy trajectories. Chantay and Johnny's narratives demonstrated the life-course health development principles of unfolding, timing, and thriving as refracted through the lens of SPD to transform oppressive circumstances and cultivate agency and empowerment [3,30]. Hence, this study contributes to scholarly conversations of the sustaining practices under which adolescents can engage in SPD in health-promotive

ways [4,7,9]. Below, we discuss how to integrate findings into health-promotive SPD theory, practice, and method.

#### 4.1. *Advancing Sociopolitical Development as Healthy Development*

Few studies offer the length of follow-up possible through our 45+ year retrospective study on the salience of adolescent SPD [18]. Participants in the current study were able to affirm their experiences as youth of color and establish healthy pathways into adulthood that were rooted in ongoing solidarity with other oppressed people. Notably, the process between SPD and healthy pathways was recursive, aligning with both recent findings on emerging adults' SPD [53], as well as other theoretical and empirical work that identifies these bidirectional effects between empowerment-based positive youth development and engaged citizenry [37,38]. Indeed, ultimately we found that participants' healthful experiences were facilitated by their adolescent sociopolitical engagement, and at the same time, their adolescent and ongoing sociopolitical engagement encouraged further healthful choices and experiences.

We further specifically examined how the principles of unfolding, timing, and thriving were embodied within participants' sociopolitical journeys. We found that both Johnny and Chantay (and others not featured in the case studies) were able to make deliberate choices away from harmful health behaviors (e.g., adolescent alcohol use) specifically because of their health-promotive SPD experiences during the sensitive period of adolescence [34,35]. Thus, our analysis also spoke to the importance of timing in SPD, affirming adolescence as a critical period for fostering SPD and lifelong commitments to social justice [24,28]. These adolescent experiences then fortified their sustained interest in social change, and as their health unfolded over adulthood they were able to thrive as they remained on health-promotive pathways. Moreover, via our approach, we see SPD as a way in which young people both improve their personal health while also fostering long-term collective wellbeing (e.g., through community improvement projects) in the face of structural oppression [54].

We thus also offer a critical lens to the life-course health development framework by illuminating how young people's resistance against oppression is embedded within their development (i.e., unfolding, turning points, and thriving) [30]. Ultimately, we see SPD as healthy development, such that one's ability to thrive in an oppressive society becomes resistance and agency within sociopolitical spaces [55]. We further resonate with the proposition that healthy development from a life-course lens includes "social scaffolding" [31], and we view SPD as scaffolding that promotes positive health pathways. As researchers seek interventions that can promote life-course health development, SPD via carefully curated opportunities structures may be a valuable pursuit [32].

#### 4.2. *Health-Promotive Opportunity Structures*

The opportunity structure of YAP was a humanizing and affirming space for SPD that challenged adultism and other isms (e.g., racism, classism, cis-heteropatriarchy). Our study highlights how YAP was able to offer opportunities to question and critique harmful systems, experience alternative spaces that fostered new pathways, build agency in a dehumanizing society, and establish a lifelong commitment to social change. Interestingly, participants in our study engaged in distinct projects sponsored on different blocks by YAP, yet they all participated in YAP leadership opportunities (e.g., the Youth Policy Committee). Thus, they may have reported very similar experiences due to both the consistent philosophy and approach across projects, as well as the shared experiences of youth leadership where they could strengthen their voice, efficacy, and ability to enact change. We herein synthesize the elements of YAP that may be salient and replicable in today's youth opportunity structures.

First, based on our findings, we encourage careful vetting and training of adults who can support a youth-centered program and build meaningful individual relationships that foster safety and care [56,57]. True to the proposed guidelines the YAP co-founders

produced in 1980 [43], the results underscore that in order to achieve sustaining and health-optimizing SPD, adults need to be prepared to work with the whole adolescent. This means that attention to adolescent participants' academic and personal social-emotional development is needed alongside the attention paid to their sociopolitical development. Again, these findings resonate with empowerment-based positive youth development in that youths' experiences of caring and growing confidence can support and reinforce their pursuits of social change, and that furthermore, learning is multidimensional as youth adopt both critical social analysis skills as well as academic and social-emotional abilities [37]. To that end, adults do also need to be skilled at practices that encourage youth to develop their own critical thinking skills and that allow youth to exercise their authentic voices and visions for social change [28].

Second, our findings suggest that offering tangible opportunities for youth to enact community change is important to building further motivation for more learning and action. Youth need to be able to see that they can catalyze actual results in their communities, and often this work occurs over multi-year processes, thus underscoring that organizations and adults need to be committed for longer-term work [58]. And finally, our findings suggest that programmatic structures where youth have actual power in the organization (e.g., ability to hire/fire staff) is important. Youth should be integral to all elements of a youth-centered program [26]. These internal opportunities to lead can form the foundation for the skills and efficacy needed to catalyze community-based change. When implemented together, these practices can encourage health-promotive SPD, as we saw in the current study.

That said, the world today is in many ways different from that of East Harlem in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Across the globe, the introduction of social media, escalation of climate change, and increase in political polarization are just some of the new challenges for communities, and for adolescents especially [59,60]. Yet, young people today, like young people 45 years ago, still fight to have their voices and opinions heard as they challenge ongoing oppressive systems [60]. We continue to see the transformative power of opportunity structures in fostering healthy development, and we situate our findings within this growing body of work [4,7,28].

#### *4.3. The Power of Retrospective Research Using a Transactional–Ecological Lens*

Given SPD's focus on adolescence, the lifelong impacts of SPD are often theorized but not empirically examined [7]. The current study, through the use of retrospective qualitative interviews and a transactional ecological lens, sheds light on the ways in which SPD during adolescence can impact and shape sociopolitical engagement and health across the life-course. In particular, and in line with recent SPD-related work, albeit focused primarily on youth practitioners [48], our use of a transactional ecological lens marks a distinction from the traditional quantitative methods used in SPD, in that we allowed participants to story their experiences, noting what was meaningful, influential, and transformative in their journeys [3]. A transactional ecological analysis also allowed us to stay attuned to the ways in which youths' micro (e.g., YAP program, proximal environments) and macro (e.g., systems of injustice, racism, classism) contexts influenced and shaped their SPD. It is critical that work focused on SPD not only acknowledges youths' proximal environments and opportunity structures, but also the structures of domination in which SPD occurs and takes place [5]. We encourage future work to use qualitative methods and approaches that privilege participants' voices in making sense of their own narratives and development while also situating and acknowledging the structural context in which human development occurs.

Moreover, in privileging participants' narratives and meaning-making, our results did not necessarily speak to the "costs" of SPD. As the findings demonstrate, all of the participants in the current sample described the "benefits" of their experience in YAP as transformative, influential, and liberating. This does not mean that participants did not experience hardships, struggles, and health-related challenges as a result of their SPD.



Rather, we interpret this to mean that participants did not necessarily recall, characterize, or consider their sociopolitical journeys as particularly costly. In fact, the narratives that we collected showcase the potential costs of *not* developing SPD. Many of the participants, like Chantay and Johnny, noted how different their life would have been had they not been in YAP, which made possible alternative pathways and facilitated their resistance to dehumanizing systems and ideologies. The current study makes clear that SPD can facilitate healthy development, particularly under conditions that value, prioritize, and humanize young people.

#### 4.4. Limitations and Future Directions

We consider the limitations to our study and offer opportunities for future research. First, this is a retrospective study that relies on participants' reflections over the past 45 years of their lives. Important details may be forgotten, and people's memories may have shifted over time. Future research can use prospective longitudinal designs to map the impacts of SPD on developmental trajectories beyond adolescence. Second, we interviewed participants who largely had extended exposure to and involvement in the program, which may have had the twofold effect of (1) fostering bonds strong enough to stay in contact with YAP adults 45 years later and (2) fostering enough opportunities for successful changemaking that color our findings more positively than they would be in a larger and more varied pool of former members. Though many of the themes identified in the sample were saturated, we encourage larger samples to bring forth additional perspectives. To that end, YAP was somewhat unusual in its breadth and funding success. Most SPD-cultivating spaces do not seek out millions of dollars of funding or evolve into legislatively-supported global organizations. Thus, the positive findings may be further skewed by the success of the overall organization, and we should remain sensitive to opportunity structures' abilities to catalyze far-reaching community impacts, especially given the lack of governmental resources allocated to such opportunities [61].

#### 5. Conclusions

The Youth Action Program met critical developmental needs for young people in East Harlem in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While the world has certainly evolved since then, young people today still contend with systemic forces that marginalize due to the cumulative impacts of poverty and racism in our society. The essential ways in which young people were able to cultivate their SPD in health-promotive ways still rings true in today's sociopolitical climate and with contemporary youths' developmental needs to make healthy choices, critique the systems that harm them, build agency, and find social purpose. This study thus presents a compelling case for how participation in a well-designed and well-implemented youth development program can have cascading effects on individuals' lives and can help to establish not only healthier lives, but stronger communities filled with people who are committed and active in creating solutions to economic, social, and/or political problems.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The original program evaluation of the Youth Action Program was initiated, organized, and led by the Youth Action Program. The data were later de-identified for the use of academic research. At the point of embarking on academic research, the Bates College Institutional Review Board determined the study was exempt from IRB review under Exemption Category 104(d)(2).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** De-identified data are available upon reasonable request.

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