

MILLENNIALS, ACTIVISM & RACE

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Racial Justice Through Media, Research and Activism

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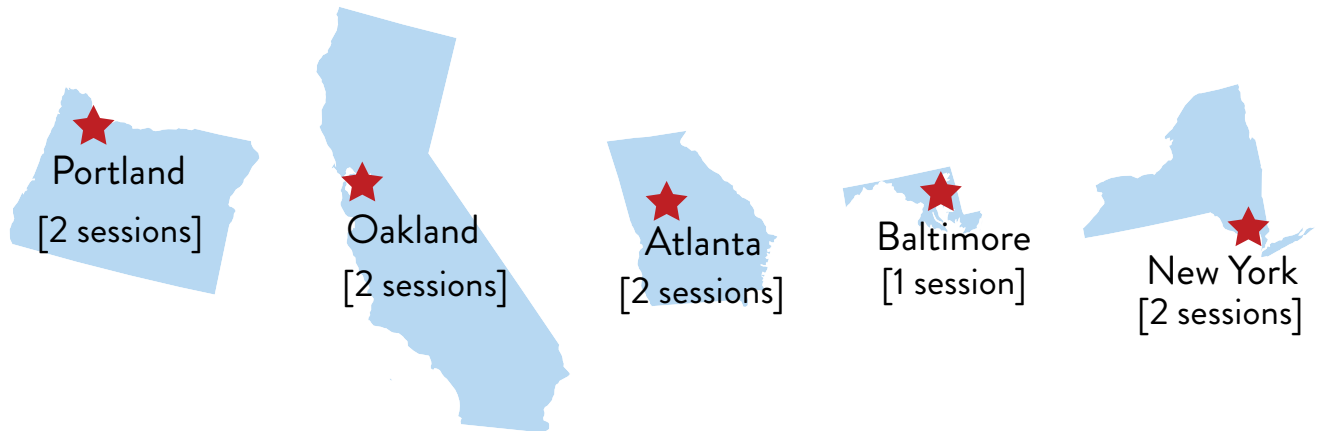
IN JUNE 2011, THE APPLIED RESEARCH CENTER (ARC) released a report titled *Don't Call Them "Post-Racial": Millennials' Attitudes on Race, Racism and Key Systems in Our Society*. Based on a series of 16 focus groups in the Los Angeles area, the report found that a large majority of young people believe that race and racism still matter in significant ways in our society, particularly in criminal justice, public schools and employment. This finding contrasts with conventional wisdom that the 2008 election of President Barack Obama ushered in the era of "Post-racial America"—and that this "more racially tolerant" generation of young people ages 18–30 (labeled the "Millennials") supposedly see society's problems as rooted in issues of class rather than race. Conservatives in the United States, in particular, tried to use Obama's electoral victory as irrefutable evidence that racism no longer mattered as a barrier to success.

Millennials, Activism and Race builds off of this previous study to continue ARC's ongoing work on the perspectives and experiences of the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in our nation's history. Our purpose here is to:

- Better understand what motivates young people—particularly young people of color—to engage in progressive organizations and movements, including the Occupy Movement that spread nationwide in fall 2011;
- Identify what young social and racial justice advocates see as the major barriers to the realization of their societal vision and goals; and
- Gauge the extent to which, and why, young progressives feel that an explicit racial justice lens is essential to social justice struggles.

This report is relevant to both social justice organizations as well as the general public. The findings can help social justice organizations better understand the attitudes and motivations of engaged Millennials. It also provides food for thought for the general reader who is interested in the perspectives of such young people during a major election year and, more importantly, a time of extreme economic challenges.

ARC staff conducted nine focus groups in five cities to explore these topics with young progressives ages 18–30 (Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; New York, NY; Oakland, CA; and Portland, OR).



We found that:

- Personal and/or family experience was consistently the most cited influence in young people’s trajectory toward social justice work, and this effect is particularly pronounced among progressive people of color.
- Occupy participants tend to be particularly disillusioned with the electoral system and mainstream politics, and are skeptical of approaches that will siphon off the energy of their movement into electoral politics. They feel that actions outside of the system offer more potential for moving a new political agenda.
- When asked directly about their feelings around using an explicit racial lens, the vast majority of participants argued that it was key to the success of social movements. They identified the connections between various systems (racism, sexism, capitalism) as critical, but such a multilayered analysis is not always expressed during broad discussions of barriers to progressive solutions.

METHODOLOGY

Conducted between February and April of 2012, the nine focus group sessions typically lasted 90 minutes and involved an average of seven participants from mixed races and backgrounds. The vast majority of the nine sessions were held in locations provided by community organizations and local Occupy-connected sites in Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; New York, NY; Oakland, CA; and Portland, OR. The focus group participants were recruited largely via public advertisements on ARC and Colorlines.com social media feeds, postings by local Occupy Movement affiliates, and contacts in ARC's 30-year network of community organizations. All of the participants lived in the metropolitan areas of the host cities, although many were raised in areas across the nation, such as Massachusetts, Detroit, North Carolina, rural Oregon and Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Southern California, and Washington, D.C.

All of the participants were informed beforehand that the focus groups would consist exclusively of "young progressives" with the topics to include "what motivates young people to get involved in progressive organizations and movements, and their views on inequality in the United States." To be considered for inclusion in the sessions, candidates had to have experience as a paid employee, volunteer or small donor of a social justice or community organization, and/or as a participant of the Occupy Movement. The sessions were audio-recorded (no video), and participants were assured that their actual names would not be used on any resulting research and media work. **Accordingly, all names of participants have been changed in this report.**

FOCUS GROUP TOPICS

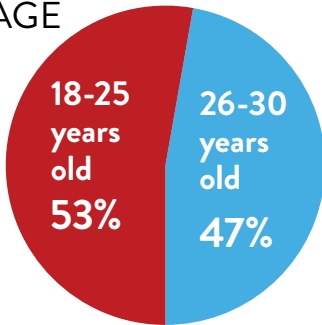
While the full script of our sessions can be found in Appendix A of this report, it is worth noting the general outline of the discussions. Each session started with a "word association" exercise in which we asked participants to write down the first thing that came to mind after hearing words such as "economy," "debt," "election" and "racism." Then we asked the participants to describe the

key aspects of contemporary society they think need to be changed, and the values and characteristics of the type of society they are seeking to help create with their social justice work and advocacy. We also asked participants about the key influences in their own personal struggle for social justice, and why they believe some of their friends and peers are not as engaged as they are. Finally, we asked participants

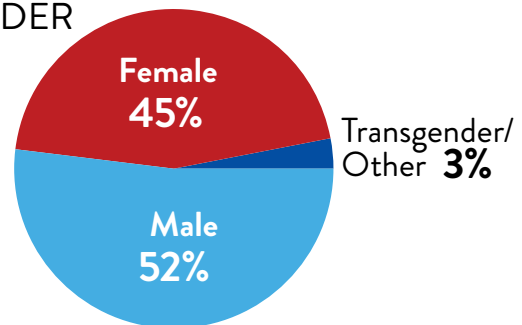
about any connections and/or differences they see between the income and class inequality that has been the focus of the Occupy movement, and the racial and gender inequality and disparities in our society. Our sessions typically concluded with reflections on whether or not participants felt social justice struggles need to be race-explicit in their analysis and public approach.

PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

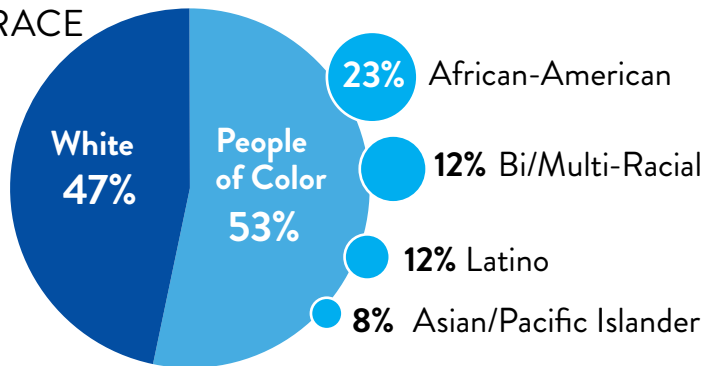
AGE



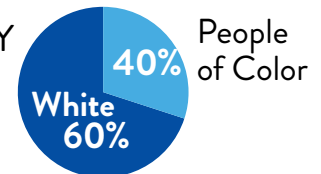
GENDER



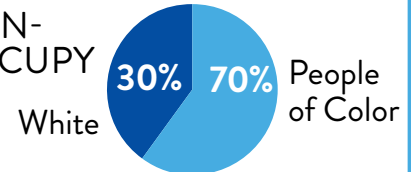
RACE



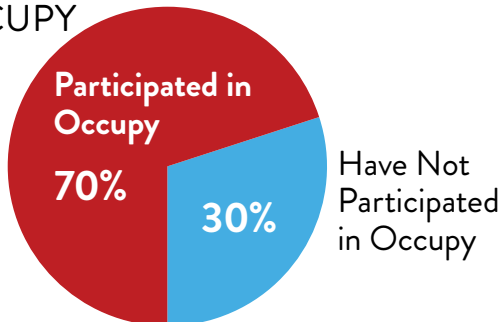
OCCUPY



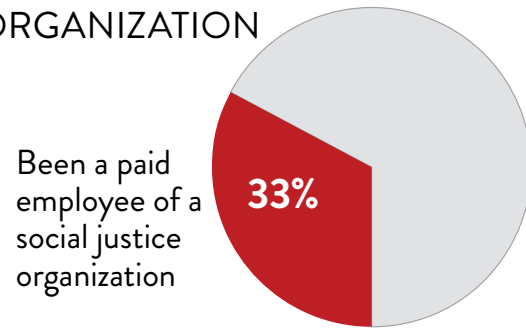
NON-OCCUPY



OCCUPY



ORGANIZATION



MOST POPULAR SOCIAL JUSTICE INTERESTS (# OF PARTICIPANTS OUT OF 60 TOTAL)

1. Racial justice **19**
2. Economic justice/class issues **16**
3. Sexism and gender issues **13**
4. Prisons and crime **13**
5. Environment **10**
6. Immigrant rights **9**
7. Education **9**
8. LGBTQ **8**
9. Healthcare **8**
10. Food justice **6**
11. Workers' rights **6**
12. Housing **5**

Other facts about our sample of young progressives, social justice advocates and Occupy participants include the following:

Occupy Participation vs. Paid Social Justice Work

About three out of five of our people of color participants were involved in the Occupy Movement (more African-American and bi-/multi-racial participants than Asian-American and Latino participants), while the vast majority of our white participants were involved. Our participants of color were more likely to have had paid work experience with community organizations than our white participants.

Passion for Race-specific Issues

In our registration questionnaire, about three out of 10 of our white participants listed racism or a racial/ethnic issue as one of their key social justice concerns, while almost half of the young progressive people of color shared this passion for race/ethnic-based social justice causes.

In that pre-focus group questionnaire, only about one in four Occupy participants listed racial justice, anti-racism or some other race/ethnic-based issue as one of their most passionate social justice issues. The exact opposite was true of our young progressive participants who were not involved in the Occupy Movement—almost three out of four of them listed a race-focus as one of their most passionate social justice issues.

Those participants in our sample who were paid employees of social justice organizations were also much more likely to be passionate about race issues, and participants who identified as male were less likely than those who did not. There was no significant difference on this issue between our age groups (18–25 and 26–30).

TO LEARN SOMETHING ABOUT THE CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

that most motivate young people to get involved in progressive causes, we asked participants in the five cities where we held our focus groups (Atlanta, Baltimore, New York, Oakland, and Portland) to describe their vision for the ideal society toward which they are working, including the values they'd most like to see espoused. During this broad discussion, we also asked participants which aspects of contemporary society they would most like to see changed, and what they see as the key barriers (internal or external) to the progress of social justice movements.

It's important to note that these questions were purposefully broad to enable us to identify the values, characteristics and barriers that were foremost in the minds of the participating young progressives. The only prompt for this discussion was a "word association" exercise in which participants were given index cards to write down the first thoughts that came to mind when presented with each of the following nine words: economy, election, debt, 1%, organizing, networking, criminal justice, immigration system, and racism.

The overall results of these discussions are summarized below. Comments made in eight or nine of the focus group sessions are listed under "Universally Expressed," and topics mentioned in at least a bare majority of our sessions are listed under "Commonly Expressed."



WHAT ASPECTS OF SOCIETY NEED TO CHANGE AND WHAT ARE THE KEY BARRIERS TO CHANGE?

Universally Expressed

- General public's ignorance or lack of awareness (of history and political analysis)
- A dominant economic ideology that prioritizes individualism (i.e., capitalism)

Commonly Expressed

- Racism and xenophobia
- Consumerism, complacency and/or absence of consensus on alternative solutions to the status quo



WHAT ARE THE VALUES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE IDEAL SOCIETY YOU WOULD LIKE TO HELP CREATE THROUGH YOUR SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK?

Universally Expressed

- Community and cooperation—a society where meaningful relationships are built

Commonly Expressed

- Self-government and self-determination in smaller-scale communities
- A balance between the collective and the individual that favors the former
- Compassion, empathy, acceptance and understanding
- Basic food and shelter for all
- Healthy, sustainable relationship to the environment and its resources



WHAT ASPECTS OF SOCIETY NEED TO CHANGE AND WHAT ARE THE KEY BARRIERS TO CHANGE?

As expressed consistently throughout all of our focus group sessions, one aspect of contemporary society that young progressives see as a major barrier to substantial social change is the **general public's purported ignorance and lack of awareness of issues** such as the following:

- Systemic causes of economic disparities
- The root causes of migration patterns on the continent
- Their communities' own histories of struggle

This was a sustained, pronounced frustration that was expressed by the participants in each of our focus group sessions, particularly young progressives who grew up in conservative areas.

Gigi, a 25-year old white progressive who grew up in rural Pennsylvania, but recently moved to Baltimore, had this to say about the topic of ignorance:

[In my hometown,] everyone is ignorant. I can't get my niece to stop using the N-word when talking about people. I have to block my family from my Facebook. I've lost a lot of friends, and it's difficult for me. I'm trying to make new friends in Baltimore, and there's a pretty strong progressive white movement here, but I don't want to be involved in organizations that are exclusively white or white-led.

Two Latina participants who had experience volunteering for immigrant rights organizations expressed their frustrations with the state of public discourse on immigration during our Portland sessions. "I've heard a lot of opposing opinions," said Victoria. "And I think if they read a book and learned the history, I don't think they would say that stuff [because] it's not correct."

"WE NEED TO SEE A PUBLIC THAT'S MORE AWARE IN GENERAL—MORE INVESTED IN LEARNING ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON IN THEIR WORLD, INSTEAD OF BEING FOCUSED ON ENTERTAINMENT."

Twenty-six-year-old undocumented immigrant Alma explained that even people from local community organizations seem to ask, "Why are people migrating over here?" And she just wants to ask them, "Well, haven't you heard of NAFTA and all of that?" It's just like they think we came to the U.S. because you know... just because." For Alma, people are ignorant of the economic realities and globalization policies that essentially force "us from our *own* country!" So the general public's fundamental lack of understanding of the economic dynamics of forced migration is a key barrier to her.

Regine, a 25-year-old Haitian-American social justice volunteer, who was a participant in one of our New York focus groups, described ignorance as "judging someone before you know them." And Adrian, a Latino/white Occupy Atlanta participant added, "We need to see a public that's more aware in general—more invested in learning about what's going on in their world, instead of being focused on entertainment. That would be a good way to get our democracy back." Similarly, our participants identified a **dominant ideology of individualism** as another key aspect of our society that needs changing.

Sometimes, but not always, participants explicitly identified capitalism as the culprit— a sentiment that was most often expressed by Occupy protestors. For example, Janice, an African-American female Occupy Atlanta participant, had this to say about capitalism:

I would like to see a replacement of capitalism, because competition is good, but the way the capitalist society works is way too selfish. You can't have your cake and eat it too. Is there a way to make people not so greedy? And we work way too hard. ... We do so much to harm ourselves. It is ridiculous what it takes to stay ahead as a human if you're not born in the 1%. You have to work way too hard. You have to be a genius or never sleep.

Stan, a Chinese-American community organizer with an economics degree, who participated in the Occupy Oakland movement, described capitalism like this:

I would say that the economic system is built to produce the results that we see in everyday life. So [society's] lack of empathy is built on the fact that the economic system thrives on competition, and we are supposed to compete with each other instead of work with each other in order to produce profit—and the need to commodify and place the monetary value on anything and everything on earth. They're talking about water as a commodity, selling water, and privatizing air in the atmosphere. Things like that are not fundamentally healthy for human beings. So the economic model of capitalism and especially this kind of pure laissez faire systems. Capitalism produces a lot of the issues that I see.

Evidence from our word association exercise also suggests that capitalism is more explicitly present in the minds of young Occupy participants than it is in the minds of social justice advocates who had not participated in the Occupy movement. Specifically, when presented with the word “economy,” young white Occupy participants were far more likely to think of capitalism than any other type of participant. Only 10 percent of the total participants listed capitalism explicitly, while more typically, the words “broken” and “bad,” or “injustice” and “unfair” came to mind (almost half of our word association respondents wrote those words).

Less ubiquitously, but nevertheless still commonly expressed by our focus group participants in terms of aspects of society that need changing were **xenophobia** and **racism**. Although these were subsets of the previously discussed broad category of “ignorance,” they are worthy of special consideration.

As was also implied in the comments expressed by Latinas Victoria and Alma above, Occupy Wall Street participant and employed Latino social justice advocate Simon identified “xenophobia or racism” as a key problem in the immigration debate. “It's not based on logic—it's based on the fear of others of these people coming over our borders. That needs to change for anything

to change. Dealing with racism at all levels of society. Not just government, but also in the media and people's day-to-day life."

Occupy Atlanta participant Leticia, a 29-year-old African-American woman, described what she envisions as an ideal society: "What I would like to see, for most people is a fantasy. I would like to see a world where the quality of life is not dependent on who you are in life or what you look like. Racism, prejudice, all of those things are not so bad based on a [macro-]level." And at the individual mental level: "I think that is like a fairy-tale world, but I would like more than just equality—more like a mindset change, a change of heart."

A fourth major category of barriers to progressive change, as identified by our focus group participants, is **complacency and/or an absence of consensus on alternative solutions** to the status quo.

Regine, who is originally from Detroit but now resides in New York, described complacency like this: "My friends are complacent coming from the midwest. A lot of people I was around were about the white picket fence life. They could not see beyond that and I always wanted to see more and do more. That could not be it for me."

In one of our Oakland focus groups, Stan the economist community organizer of Chinese descent explained that the dominant narrative in the United States since the end of the Cold War has been "that the capitalism method has prevailed and there is no alternative." The Canadian-born 25-year-old continued, "I think for many people in other parts of the world, another world is definitely possible. People are experimenting with alternative ways to be organized, alternative political systems. I think that the barrier of the American left is a lack of imagination, the unwillingness to look at Third World people's struggles to build alternatives. Even for folks who do have the imagination to do it, to have the courage to undertake a project like that is monumental."

Building immediately off of Stan's comment in that focus group discussion, 26-year old white female Occupy Oakland participant Claire argued that "white fear of brown folks" and "this white supremacist view that we have manicured lawns [and modern creature comforts]" are to blame for what Stan generously referred to as a lack of imagination. Claire, whose primary social justice emphasis is in sex workers' rights, elaborated by saying

One thing I really like that is coming up is the term 'white savior industrial complex' —the idea that the way Americans interact with the rest of the world is only to save them, help them, give them a helping hand up. All this imagery that is really disrespectful and problematic and I think that is a big reason why Americans are not willing to look at the rest of the world. We are so complicated and to look at something else that seems to be simple and see that as primitive instead of to see it as some kind of homeostasis, or like pure, simple. That there is good in simplicity.

WORTH NOTING – THE “NON-PROFIT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX”

While the sentiment was not expressed widely across the nine focus group sessions we held around the country, some young people, including those with experience as paid employees for social justice organizations expressed significant distrust with what at least one participant referred to as the “non-profit industrial complex”. This barrier – internal to the movement for social justice – was identified in particular during Portland and Oakland sessions.

“I was really surprised that when I started working in non-profits, I thought there would be kind of this whole community-driven perspective, but I think often times advocates even withhold information from the community in order to maintain their relationship to power,” said Karen, a 25-year old multi-racial woman (African-American / white / American Indian) to considerable agreement from her fellow Portland focus group participants.

Later in the session when discussing some of the reasons why greater momentum hadn’t been built domestically for social justice, Karen reiterated the point. “I think what’s keeping people from pushing back on these systems is the fact that our movements, our social justice movements like the civil rights movements were all moved within the system by creating 501(c)(3)’s.” Again, Karen’s thoughts were met with approval from the group, which featured two Occupy Portland participants, two individuals currently employed as social justice, and one other person like herself who had both sets of experiences. “I think that the non-profit system really needs to be *abolished* [group agreement] because I think the number one thing that is keeping, you know, people from building movements, is that our movements are capitalistic now.”

Similarly, the young white activist Roger, who is particularly involved in Occupy Oakland, recounted comments provided by a Black Panther Party elder a few years ago after the downtown street actions that followed the shooting of African-American Oscar Grant by White local transit police officer Johannes Mehserle:

He was commenting in 2009 about this divide between people who have been in the community for ages, [i.e.,] the non-profit-ization of Oakland activism vs. suddenly, like all these white radicals like going in the street and making sh*t happen. He was like, “well listen, these [white radicals] are some of the most privileged folk you can imagine. They actually *identify* that they are part of the problem, and while maybe they’re [causing] other people [to face] some of the consequences for their actions, they’re getting out there doing sh*t. While some of the people who are—like Elaine Brown said, the entire [Oakland] city council is there on the blood of the Black Panther Party. And look what they’re f*cking doing to us!”

As is hinted here, and as we shall see later in this report, Roger and other Occupy participants are largely distrustful of electoral politics, but also view non-profits as potentially stifling entities that don’t necessarily contribute very much or enough to the effort to force progressive change in our society.



WHAT ARE THE VALUES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE IDEAL SOCIETY YOU WOULD LIKE TO HELP CREATE THROUGH YOUR SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK?

The only universally expressed value and characteristic of an ideal progressive society, according to analysis of our nine focus groups were **cooperation** and **community**. Or in the words of Sherise, a 22-year old African-American woman who works on LGBTQ issues as well as the criminalization of youth of color, a society “in which meaningful relationships are built.”

“We need a social education in the public education system. There has to be a real discussion of how we really create citizens,” reflected Sherise. “In the higher grades it’s about being competitive, not about building meaningful relationships with the people around you.”

“I’d like to see an increase of what’s called social capital,” added Nelson, an Asian-American community organization volunteer who participated in the same session. “And having our society move from individualism and self interest toward groups and organizations and restoring relationships and community.”

Many of our participants emphasized smaller-scale communities as necessary to transforming society. For example, Anita, a 24-year old bi-racial (Latina/white) Occupy Oakland participant said, “I’d really like to see societies that are like on a much smaller level. ... I don’t think large government works in theory or in practice because it’s just too many people. So I’d really like to live in a smaller community with people that are interested in that community.”

Anita’s comments lead us to another of the commonly expressed values of the ideal society as articulated by the young progressives in our focus groups: **self-government** or **self-determination**. She concedes that “community” is not the “most concrete” term, but nevertheless, thinks “there are very practical ways in which you can have it. Like eating together, and like caring about certain issues. Like doing certain work together brings people together. So I’d much rather live in something like that that’s more self-governing and more immediate. You’re more immediately affecting larger decisions.”

Her 25-year-old Occupy Oakland colleague Mae (Filipino/Latina/white) concurred. “More localized economies. Empowering the people who actually live there. Getting them to produce their own thing. Less hierarchy, More cooperation. And going off of that, you’d be able to sort of self-police if there’s more direct relationships between people.”

GENERALLY, THE PARTICIPANTS REFERRED TO EQUITY BROADLY SPEAKING (“EQUITY FOR ALL”), AS OPPOSED TO CALLING SPECIFICALLY FOR RACIAL EQUITY.

Occupy Atlanta's Alicia, a white 19-year old participant who identified "anti-capitalism in all its forms" as her social justice passion on our pre-session questionnaire, agreed that "we need to go back to this idea of self-determination." Saying that representative politics "represent bullsh*t," Alicia added, "It is actually the opposite of that because you are delegating your agency and will to someone else and pretending that they can make decisions on behalf and I don't believe that is possible. I want what I want and that can change at any second. You don't know what I f*cking want."

Other commonly expressed values and characteristics included:

- Compassion / Empathy / Acceptance & Understanding
- Basic Food and Shelter Needs For All Should Be Guaranteed
- Healthy, Sustainable Relationship to the Environment and its Resources

WORTH NOTING – EQUITY

While the term "equity" was only used in just under one half of the sessions (and thereby missing the minimum threshold for "commonly expressed" items), it is important to make note of the ways in which it was mentioned during this open-ended, initial section of our focus group discussions. Facilitators were instructed to avoid prompting participants for their thoughts on race, racism, racial justice, and racial equity during these segments. This allowed for us to analyze the extent to which such terms are present "at the surface" in the minds of progressive Millennials.

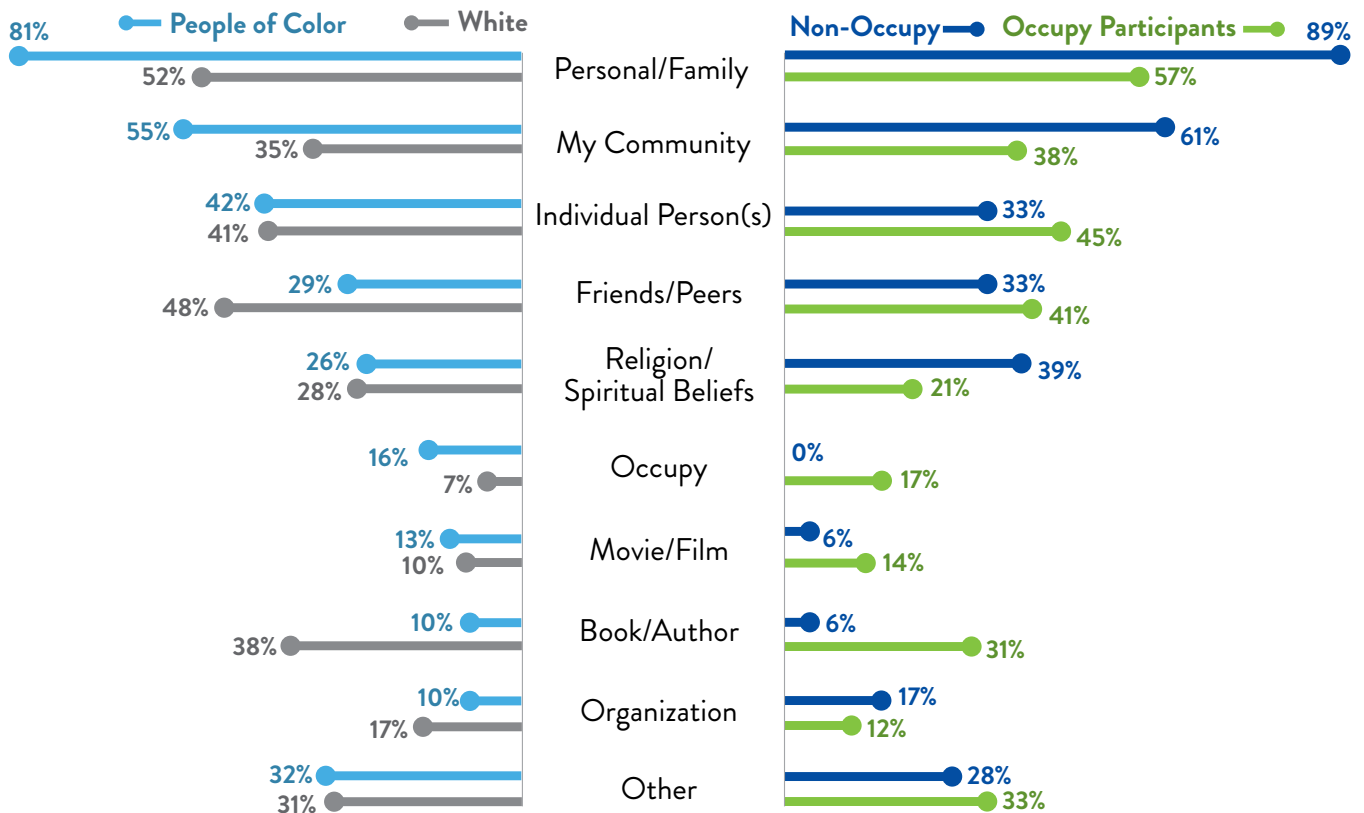
Generally, the participants referred to equity broadly speaking ("equity for all"), as opposed to calling specifically for racial equity.

Racial justice was expressed in several focus groups, though not a majority of them. Generally speaking, it wasn't among the first things expressed during this "unprompted" section of the focus group discussions, and was not articulated as often as we would expect given the near uniformity of opinion of the importance of incorporating a racial lens in current struggles against inequality, as opposed to utilizing a class/income lens exclusively.

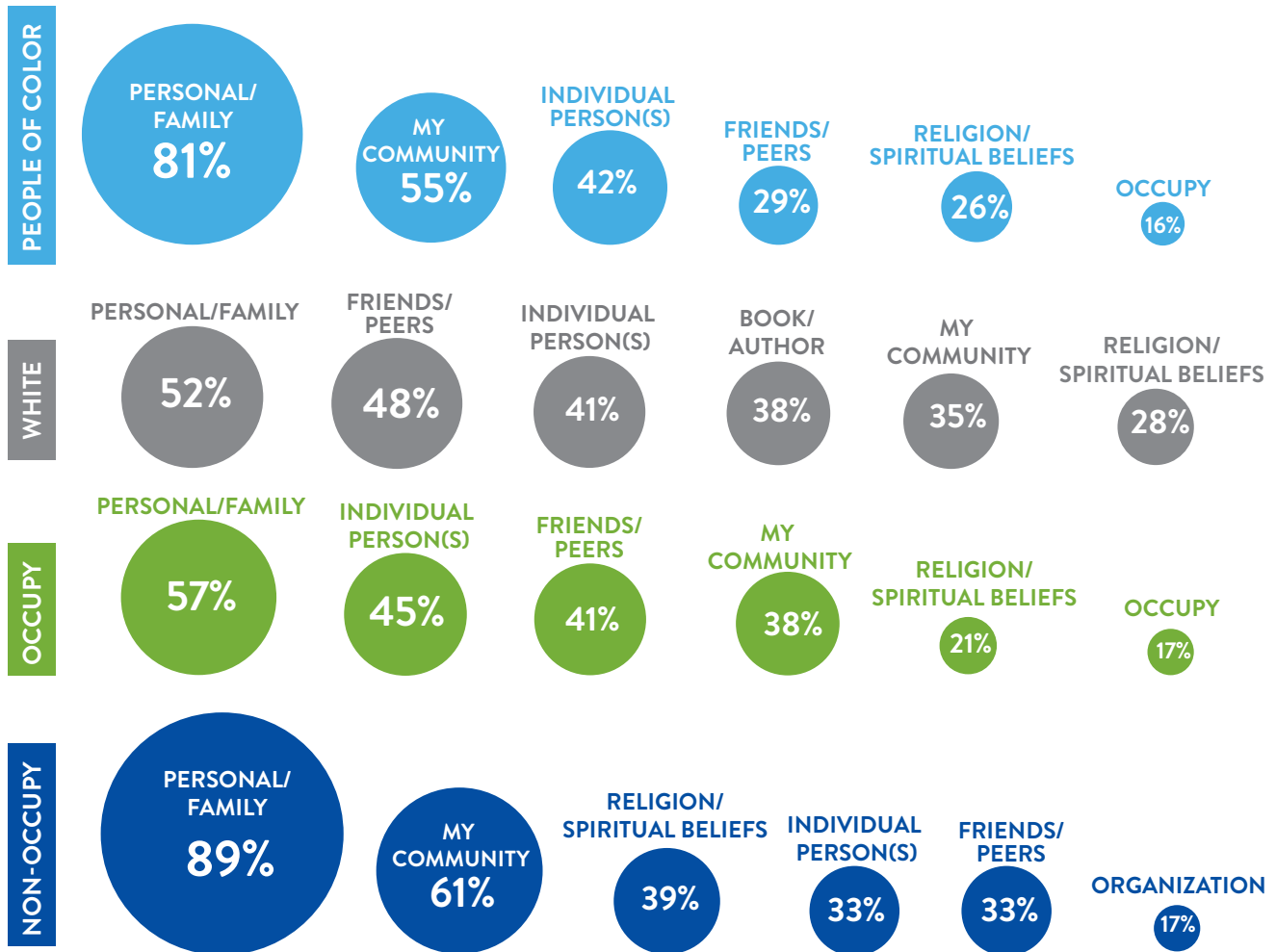
ONE OF THE MAJOR AIMS OF THIS REPORT is to help shed light on what motivates young people to become involved in progressive organizations, causes, and movements. To do so, we asked participants to rank from a list of nine, the top three influences on their personal path toward social justice work / activism (Note: participants were free to write-in one, two, or three alternative influences if they felt our choices did not meet their story).

RESPONSE RATES, BY RACE AND OCCUPY PARTICIPATION

What were the top three influences on your path toward social justice work / activism?



RESPONSE RATES, BY RACE AND OCCUPY PARTICIPATION (CONT'D)



Data from these rank choices, and from subsequent sharing of individual stories and paths in the focus group setting, make clear that **Personal / Family Experience** was the most frequently cited influence for all groups in our study (people of color vs. whites; Occupy vs. Non-Occupy). Nevertheless, it is critical to note that this link was definitely more pronounced for our people of color and Non-Occupy white participants. In fact, overwhelming majorities of the young people of color we spoke to said that their personal or family experience was one of the top motivations for pursuing social justice. Only about half of the white participants made the same reflection.

“MY PASSION
CAME FROM
MY PERSONAL
EXPERIENCE AND
MY RAGE ABOUT
IT CAME FROM
UNDERSTANDING
THAT IT WAS
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POVERTY IS
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ISSUE, SO IS
IMMIGRATION
ENFORCEMENT,
ETC. IT’S ALL
PART OF A
PLAN TO KEEP
PEOPLE DOWN.”

“It wasn’t until my personal experiences and media came together that I was mobilized,” explained Derrick, a 27-year old Black participant in one of our New York sessions. His key passions include working to prevent hate crimes against LGBTQ people and challenging unfair immigration policies. “When I realized that what was happening to me and my family was not an aberration but was part of a plan. My passion came from my personal experience and my rage about it came from understanding that it was broader. Poverty is a political issue, so is immigration enforcement, etc. It’s all part of a plan to keep people down.”

In an interesting contrast, some white social justice advocates talked about the value of maintaining a detachment in their lives from their own personal experience and identity from the social justice work and volunteering that they do.

“Sometimes I am more willing to work for issues that don’t directly affect me personally, because it’s easier, mentally and emotionally,” admits 30-year old Mary, who has struggled with poverty at times in her life. “Where as fighting economic justice, it’s really personally affecting me and it’s an uphill battle. Where as dealing with prison reform, I have never been to prison. It’s just a little easier emotionally to work with.”

Claire, another white female participant from the same Oakland-based focus group concurred, explaining that for a lot of the people working in the sex workers’ rights movement who are sex workers,

It is too intense for them because everything is personal. For instance, if you are on a panel and you are debating somebody and they are making some generalizations, it affects you, it’s not an abstract issue, and it’s personal. So a lot of people defect from sex work justice and go on to do gender or racial justice because if it is not as personal for them then it is a lot easier to do that work.

“It’s always easier to wash dishes in somebody else’s house,” concurred another white participant in the same focus group, Occupy Oakland participant Chris. “It’s feeling less the burden that this is a tremendous sense that I have to take this on. It just seems so much more immense and personal when you’re directly dialed in.”¹¹

Apart from personal or family experience, more than half of the people of color participants listed the broader category “**my community’s experience**” as a key motivator for them (this disproportionate effect was driven primarily by Latinos and API participants in our sample, as opposed to Black and Bi-/Multi-racial participants), while only about one-third of white participants said the same.

Next, about 40% of all focus group participants listed an **individual person** as a key motivation for their path toward social justice activism, and neither the race, gender, age, nor participation in the Occupy movement of our various participants seemed to make any difference in the likelihood of this motivation.

Half of our white participants were largely led toward social justice in part by their **friends / peers**, while only 30% of people of color participants were similarly influenced. Whether or not the participant was an Occupy participant didn't seem to make a difference.

About one-quarter of our participants **rated “religious / spiritual beliefs”** as one of their top influences, though Oakland appears to lag considerably behind our other four locations (Atlanta, Baltimore, New York, and Portland) in this respect.

Five of our eighteen people of color Occupy participants (28.7%) listed **Other: Occupy** as a key influence (all from Occupy Atlanta), while only two of twenty-two of our white Occupy participants (8.3%) did the same (one in Oakland and one in Atlanta). This higher rate for people of color Occupy participants combined with the fact that focus group participants had to “write-in” this choice, suggests there may be an increased level of passion, connection and empowerment to the Occupy Movement for those people of color who have remained deeply involved in the movement (at least in Atlanta) in comparison to white Occupy participants.

When asked why she thought her friends and peers were not as politically engaged or active as she was, Mae explained to her own laughter as well as that of the group:

I'm pretty sure maybe 90% of my friends in real life have my political posts blocked on Facebook, probably. [Laughs]... I really don't know, I wish I could convince more people. I feel like it's mostly an echo chamber most of the time. You find people who already think this way versus getting people you thought you were close to, to engage with you in these discussions. ... And then you start feeling you're crazy, but then you go to some sort of event, and you're like, “oh okay! We know what's going on.

The most frequent explanations our participants gave for lower levels of activity among some of their friends were a lack of awareness / complacency, as discussed above in the barriers to change, sometimes described using the term “privilege.”

WHILE THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN and election featured high levels of political engagement among the Millennial generation—not just in voting² but also in campaign volunteer hours—the political engagement outlook in 2012 is very different. Media reports suggest voter registration is down across the country due in part to the loss of “hope” in the Obama administration and frustration with Capitol Hill gridlock, more generally.³ A fall 2010 survey by Rock the Vote stated that close to six in 10 people under the age of 30 expressed more cynicism regarding the political process than they felt in 2008.⁴

And unsurprisingly, young people who report that they are likely to vote the “lesser of two evils” are typically unwilling to devote time to volunteer on campaigns. As one reporter remarked regarding young Occupiers, “Very few of the committed folks sacrificing time, safety, and comfort to make the occupations and street protests happen are going to switch uncritically into re-elect Obama mode”.⁵ Multiple news reports and polling data have indicated that there is growing cynicism befalling the millennial generation around the political process, and a number of survey results indicate a similar trend in growing distrust and disillusionment with our bi-partisan system and youth involvement in that system.⁶ Sarah Seltzer wrote in the Washington Post, “Occupy will push candidates to embrace its positions but won’t rely on them to be leaders of the movement - leaders who can fail, compromise or be toppled in a vote.”

Indeed, our findings suggest that members of the Occupy movement have fundamental critiques of the political system, elections in particular. While there will be some diversity of Occupy approaches to the 2012 election, the vast majority of our focus group participants with Occupy experience held little to no faith in the electoral system. Evidence from our word association exercise strongly suggests that Occupy participants have a more fundamental critique of the electoral system than other young progressives. More than two-thirds of Occupy participants in our focus groups – regardless of race – described the election with terms such as “corrupt,” “fraud,” “pointless,” or “fail”. Only one out of our 18 non-Occupy participants did so.

MORE THAN TWO-THIRDS OF OCCUPY PARTICIPANTS IN OUR FOCUS GROUPS – REGARDLESS OF RACE – DESCRIBED THE ELECTION WITH TERMS SUCH AS “CORRUPT,” “FRAUD,” “POINTLESS,” OR “FAIL”. ONLY ONE OUT OF OUR EIGHTEEN NON-OCCUPY PARTICIPANTS DID SO.

“ELECTION”

pointless/fail
OBAMA/PRESIDENT

DISEMPowering
VOTING

REPRESENTATION
BEAURACRATS MONEY HEATED
POLITICS WRONG

corrupt/fraud

OCCUPY PARTICIPANTS

Note: Font sizes are proportional to the percentage of respondents who used the word in response to the word “election”. For example, the words “corrupt/fraud” was used 33% by Occupy participants as the word “politics” which was used 5%.

“ELECTION”

Obama/
President

FAIR/TRUE CHOICE

VOTING
GOVERNMENT
POLITICS
CORRUPT/FRAUD

NON-OCCUPY PARTICIPANTS

Note: Font sizes are proportional to the percentage of respondents who used the word in response to the word “election”. For example, the words “Obama/President” was used 38% as the word “government” which was used 6%.

Many Occupy participants used even harsher language during the focus group discussions themselves. To Pete, a white 25-year old Occupy Oakland participant, the electoral system is “such a pile of sh*t.” The two major political parties, he thought, are “both basically on the same side fighting for the same people” and the election is a “huge dog and pony show” with debates acting as some sort of bad reality TV. “It is only there to distract people from the real issues. ... They bring up these bullsh*t talking points, and they go back and forth *ad nauseum* and nothing happens! And I don’t know how else to put it. I’m so disillusioned with the entire system. I mean, even on a local level.”

TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE?

“The only time I ever voted was for Obama, I got caught up in the ‘Hope’ thing,” recounted Alex, a 25-year old Occupy Atlanta participant whose social justice passions include queer/trans rights, racial justice, and bridge-building. “Then I realized it was a sham, so I actually don’t really believe in the whole electoral process. And I actually think I grew up believing in that process, especially being part of the military. I came from a very conservative military family.” Alex doesn’t expect to vote in the 2012 elections.

On the other hand, while Afshin, a 28-year old male Occupy participant of Persian descent clearly also distrusts electoral politics (“I have absolutely no faith in the system at all.”), he nevertheless expects to vote in November in Atlanta. “I can’t help but thinking that as sad as it is, there is a lesser of two evils. Like I have seen some [policy] decisions that are made that affect peoples’ lives immediately and drastically. So I still vote but I still spend all my time actively committed to work towards a different system... Until we have another system, there is a difference to me between the two, especially on a local level.”

Similarly, 22-year old white male Occupy Wall Street participant Jake felt that “The difference between the two means health care for millions of women ... and my own privilege to make an ideological decision could adversely impact someone’s life based on who gets elected.” And 26-year old white male Occupy Oakland participant Chris also expects to vote to prevent things from “becoming far worse.” Judicial appointments, in particular, are a motivating factor because of the long-term impact of decisions such as the anti-campaign finance reform *Citizens United*. “These sorts of court decisions are not responsive to the outrage of the populace. It’s not something we can easily go back on. Things can get worse. There are some okay things, this is a half-decent country and I want to keep that half.”

Henry, a 28-year old Korean-American who registered voters as part of his most recent employment with a local community organization, felt torn by past experience with racial exclusion in the electoral system, and his desire to support campaigns that will add to racial/ethnic symbolic representation. “It’s hard for me to really want to invest in it because I know it hasn’t been good for me, and my family.”

He recounted a story about knocking on the door of an unregistered Korean woman who told him she didn’t really know how the electoral system works. “She said, ‘I don’t know what it gets me.’” Henry said, “among the API community, there’s so many languages and cultural barriers to participating in this process. And they don’t even think about us, so why would they want us to do this thing?”

Henry did not participate in Occupy and understands where many Occupiers are coming from when they say that electoral politics are inherently dirty, but he nevertheless feels drawn to an Asian-American candidate in a local election, in part to support representation. “At the same time the system needs to change, it also needs to have people who do represent us... I still want to support her because on a symbolic level, it’s like Obama. To have one of our own up there, it means a lot. It can inspire young people to get involved. And they can get there, and figure it out on their own.”

Manish, a 28-year old South Asian American, who like Henry, did not participate in Occupy, generally wished that the movement did engage more directly with influencing the Democratic Party. “Like how the Tea Party pushed the right to the right. The 99 percent is our chance to do that. We need to organize. I know we want to topple capitalism but that’s not going to happen now. So let’s take small steps to push the Democrats.”

LOCAL VS. NATIONAL ELECTIONS

Living in New York City, Thomas, a white 29-year old Occupy Wall Street participant argued that the movement had wielded considerable influence at the local level. “Local politics affect people’s lives more directly. I think Occupy affects local elections more than campaigning. We have challenged a lot of city councilmen who have had to make a stand. Some have moved to the left. Occupy is our way of affecting local politics.”

Kim, a white 30-year old Occupy Wall Street participant who says she only votes occasionally in local elections to “spite some local politicians,” argues that this doesn’t mean she’s uninvolved in local politics. Quite the contrary. “I am very involved in local politics but somehow voting is part of becoming complicit in the system. I think it is bullsh*t that people think voting is their civic engagement duties and that is it.”

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Jason, a 30-year old Baltimore-based African-American lawyer for a national civil rights/liberties organization, wished there was a viable third political party for the presidential election, but felt it is critical to vote in state and local elections, particularly this fall in Maryland where there will be two referenda on the ballot – gay marriage and the DREAM Act for undocumented young people – that concern him.

Some Occupy participants, like the heavily involved Roger, do just that, but place no more faith in local elected officials than he does national politicians. “When I vote, I vote Peace and Freedom, or Green, just for the hell of it. ... Local elections? It’s like what a**hole who’s *nearby* do you want to vote in so you can go to the city council meeting and yell at them? What’s funny about Occupy is I think more of us have actually been participating in our local democracy than ever before because we’re going to go and yell at them about different things.”

For Louise, a 29-year old white female Occupy Atlanta participant, there’s value in those types of experiences for Roger and others.

I think some of those things can be bonding with people you are with, learning how to speak better to power, even to be in a committee room and ... have the courage to stand up there and say ‘you f*cked up and let me tell you why’. That could be training for how to confront power, because they make it so scary because they are so much higher than you and you are so small and there’s ten of them and they laugh at you.

More fundamentally, though, Louise believes that elections kill the momentum of progressive movements. “When people are getting worn to the tip, [and are] more willing to take a chance and take a stand, they kill it with the voting. They channel people. Like the Trayvon Martin rally was a classic case of quoting Malcolm X, who never urged you to vote.” Louise was left frustrated by the vast majority of speakers at a recent rally who ended their speeches with calls to “go out there and vote.”

“People were upset and they completely killed that spirit of resistance,” she added. “So either you could try to get people to vote or you could try to use that same time to try and get people out to organize and to rally, even take over committee rooms.”

Also in Atlanta, Josh, a 28-year old white Occupy participant elaborated upon this fundamental critique, arguing that the electoral system was a “very ingenious and effective way of diverting threats” to the overall political and economic system of oppression.

For exactly what you are saying, a bunch of people get riled up and are threatening the status quo and they get pointed to electoral politics, ... [and] even if they play that [electoral] game and they win, now they have their guy in power, and so now they have doubly invested themselves in the system which was stacked against them in the first place and I

think Obama is a really great example of that because you have a bunch of people who were disaffected and who won...through this great expression of grass roots organizing and now all those people who might have otherwise would have been angry, dissident, community organizers are now sitting there in front of Obama and talking about how he is going to fix things.

Another Occupy Oakland participant, Chris, implied this same anesthetizing effect when talking about the lack of activity post-election around the administration. “That was a really interesting thing after Obama got elected, I was wondering with all these lists of people who signed up to help, organize and get out the vote. I wondered if this would be their role to do things in community and actually leading to the changes we wanted to see and it was like ‘Nope, see you in four years.’” [For more, see Box, Young Progressives Assessing Obama Administration]

Still, many of the young people we spoke with felt doubly frustrated that they had few solutions or alternatives to the electoral and political system which left them feeling so disgusted. For example, Occupy Atlanta’s Alex, who has lost faith in the system and doesn’t expect to be voting again soon, did struggle with the fact that “the people in power do have a lot of influence over our lives, but how do we get the people in power who we want? I think that’s the answer that a lot of us don’t have.”

Alex has lost faith for working within the system though. “I have been around that block a minute, working in a non-profit organization and a legal non-profit and work in law constantly and am still like, ‘why am I doing this?’ It’s just like fighting the beast that keeps coming back, we are just defending ourselves and not creating anything different.” It’s not a problem Alex expects the Millennial generation can solve.

YOUNG PROGRESSIVES ASSESSING OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

I remember voting for him and I remember being glued to the TV with my roommates. And we saw him get elected and we bought into that whole hope, change thing. But now, I'm totally not for him because he's just like another Bush.

—Mae, 25, Filipino/Latina/white
Occupy Oakland participant

I didn't like Obama's politics in 2004, and the more I learned and saw, the more I was disappointed that he became the new image of black male leadership. He's taken MLK's place and become the icon of black male leadership. It's very frustrating to me.

... I don't like Obama, I don't like the choices the Democratic Party makes as relating to issue areas they agree to compromise on. I don't like Obama's foreign policy, which is the main thing that irks me, he gave up on [the health care] public option, and now it's all on the Supreme Court. He made a series of compromises that didn't seem necessary. I love his press conferences and his ability to communicate, [though].

—Jason, 30, African-American

The energy [on election night 2008 in Berkeley] was really amazing because people were just happy. Like really,

really happy. ... But [now,] I don't know. I think it's just— I really don't think it's a problem with him. I don't think it's like he is the only person that's responsible for the lack of change, or the little change that there has been. I think it's ... a systemic problem. There are so many other players involved, too, that are really not letting him do like what he would really want to do in society.]

—Anita, 24, Latina/white
Occupy Oakland participant

For the past couple of presidential elections there had been movements for Ralph Nader and all the other candidates on the outside and then it seemed like in 2008 all the people previously interested in third party candidates seemed to now be more into Obama. I guess it's a good thing in the end, but I still have a hard time with the two-party system. Even with Obama and the feeling of hope he was giving people, I think it's a good thing, but seeing what's happened with his presidency, he just furthered in my mind that the President is powerless, just a figurehead of some sort. I felt the same way about Bush. ... He himself was essentially powerless and he was just there to basically

play out the role that other people had set him up to play.

—Mary, 30, white, social justice volunteer (gender, racial, and economic justice)

I don't think Obama was necessarily a complete sham, I think putting all your hope in him as the savior of the country was completely naive to begin with and I don't think anybody should have ever had that hope, because he is one man at the top of a corrupt chain.

... [A]nd I'm not saying that he would [fix things] if he could but I'm saying that even if he wanted to he couldn't make it happen. But I think that him being in power did something great for this country because finally we got someone who wasn't an old white guy to be president and that is a great victory for this country.

—Sadie, 20, Ethiopian-American
Occupy Atlanta participant

I think if there is something that we can take out of it, it seems that saving ourselves is too important to be left to saviors. We can't just put this guy in charge and forget about it. If we want things to change, we have to take it into our own hands. —Chris, 26, white male
Occupy Oakland participant

IN 2011'S *DON'T CALL THEM POST-RACIAL REPORT*, we found that a media and pollster narrative that labeled Millennials as “post-racial” did so by making an unwarranted extrapolation from their more open race relations in comparison to previous generations. Most of the young people we spoke to in Los Angeles, regardless of racial identity, believed that racism continues to play a significant role in our society.

The progressive young people we spoke to almost uniformly agree that racism continues to play a negative role in our society. The topic came up, even when unprompted, in a slight majority of sessions as an aspect of society that should be changed, or was implied by participants bemoaning ignorance and lack of awareness as barriers to an ideal society. Moreover, during explicit discussions in our focus groups about the differences between racial inequality and class/income disparities, participants again reiterated that racism has an independent and major impact in areas that went far beyond economics.

Still, our society's “post-racial” narrative is a challenge for racial justice progressives both externally and internally within the progressive movement. Eliana, a 26-year old Latina educational justice advocate in New York City described the external difficulties she has had talking about segregation with some parents, one of whom asked why it was necessary to talk about race. “And it's this idea that we are living in post racial America and that we are equal and we don't have to talk about it any more,” said Eliana. “We do talk about it but a lot of people shut down.” Simon, a 25-year old Latino Occupy Wall Street participant agreed that when talking to the media “people just shut down when you mention race, it's a barrier to getting the message across. Other people's ignorance is a barrier. It's just hard because people's ignorance make them shut down and not see where you are coming from.”

Sometimes within progressive spaces, the responses are not much different. For example, Trudy, a 27-year old white anti-racist organizer moved from New York to Portland within the past year, and arrive, looking for similar organizations. After having some difficulty, she looked toward a local activist support, but when she brought up the topic of race, “no one really wanted to talk about it there”. This surprised her a bit because “Portland in some ways has this reputation of being really progressive on environmental issues or things like that. And I guess in my mind that came with a bundled package of being progressive on a whole host of other issues.”

According to the young progressives in our focus groups, one of the primary reasons many white progressives don't talk much explicitly about race is

privilege and the impact that has on individuals educating themselves. As articulated by 26-year old Chris, a white Occupy Oakland participant, “There is an imbalance between the amount of time that is spent thinking about the issue at hand and it is especially imbalanced with someone who had privilege and someone who hasn’t had to deal with these sort of things vs. someone who deals with this everyday.” And as another white 26-year old Occupy Oakland participant named Claire added, “if you go along the path that is provided for you, its not there. It is not in history books, it is not in the education that we are providing for our kids unless someone makes a special effort to do it.”

Henry, a 28-year old Korean-American community organizer in Portland, argued a bit more broadly that “people don’t want to talk about race in general around the country and around the world because it makes people uncomfortable. Because at the end of the day it’s about, ‘you’ve got more than me.’ Or ‘I feel guilty.’” He also said that he and his family have had traumatic experiences around racism, which are not emotionally easy to bring up, so he himself remains silent on issues of race sometimes. That is in part due to the lack of response of white people when he does indeed bring up issues of race. “It’s not like people hear me all the time. People are like, ‘yeah, okay,’ and then they walk away.”

In contrast, the young progressives in our focus groups were typically quite willing and comfortable talking about issues of race and racism—and using institutional and/or systemic language when doing so.⁷ But, some of our participants cautioned us against assuming that they were reflective of a majority of progressives in their area in that respect. For example, the participants in one of the Portland focus groups wanted to make clear that theirs was the minority position amongst the area’s progressives – particularly when including progressives of all ages – on whether or not race should be an explicit part of economic justice discussions and work.

RACIAL REPRESENTATION IN OCCUPY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The Occupy movement has certainly raised the nation’s consciousness around economic inequality by, among other things, placing a public spotlight on the distance between the 1% and the 99%. And clearly within the movement itself, there’s a sense that Occupy should move “beyond” what many of our focus group participants considered to be a useful, limited and simplified conceptualization. For example, Edwin, a 30-year old white male Occupy Oakland participant from a low-income background,

“the 99 versus the 1% was an interesting narrative, and discussion point in October and November [2011. But] I think we’ve moved past it now, personally. Because what if you’re part of the 2 or 3%? You still have a lot, hugely different experience to someone on the bottom of the total 100%, in terms of where the class structures are in this country, you know?” If you were the top 10%, you’re in a plush life in a lot of ways financially, and have so many different advantages than someone in the bottom. So ‘We are the 99%’ is a nice rallying cry, but you need to be

a little bit more critical than that at this stage of the game. ... It was a very interesting way to get into the movement. And recognize that 1% of the country has 40% of the wealth. Now once we have that frame of reference, it's time to get more critical than just saying, '99% vs. 1%'. Now, it's just, 'break the whole class structure.'

Occupy Atlanta participant Leticia, an African-American woman of roughly the same age as Edwin, made similar statements about the movement having progressed beyond the "99 versus 1%" framework. But unlike Edwin, she expanded her framework beyond class by saying

"So you're grouping me into an area where there is privilege and I'm here at the bottom, so how does that equate, what does that mean to me? Like with immigration, you say we're 99, so this is what I live with everyday, these are my issues, what's yours? The numbers don't necessarily hold the place in people's heart, because it's a number where we've grouped everybody together and so many people feel like, "I'm tired of being grouped, these are my issues, I can't go out and protest without getting profiled."

Similarly, Karen another woman of color who participated briefly in the Occupy movement in Portland, also argued for the application of a racial lens to the Occupy movement's class framework. "When we look globally and generationally, the people who have been systemically at the bottom, have already been brown folks globally," she told us. But when the 25-year old multi-racial (Black/white/American Indian) organizer tried to bring up similar issues of race at the Occupy Portland meetings she attended, she received little to no support. Already burdened with what she described as an unsustainable and unhealthy work load, she decided to stop participating in Occupy.

A 27-year old Latina community organizer named Jessica said she has had trouble imagining herself as part of the Occupy movement pretty much from the start.

I've told a number of people. I should be the most motivated to be part of Occupy – like my values and my mentality fit so much of what's happening. But as a person of color I've had zero interest in entering the space in Portland. But I also don't think the narrative is very different in other parts of the country. I think the word alone – Occupy – is one piece of a problem. And not reflective and respectful of indigenous cultures in the United States. And I think, just who you see, and how you see different things taking place, dramatically impacts who sees themselves as part of the movement. And in Portland and everywhere I feel like I've seen lots of pictures of white folks as part of Occupy. And it's just been hard to imagine myself as part of it.

Those primarily white media images would likely irk Mae, a 25-year old Filipina/Latina/white female Occupy Oakland participant who said, I never get filmed for an action. Like I never get interviewed, [nor do] people who look like me. [Why not?] Because I don't have the "face" of the movement? Some white participants from Occupy Oakland agreed that the mainstream media's images white-washed their movement, by marginalizing the many radical people of color voices amongst them.

Karen, the woman who participated in Occupy Portland briefly before leaving frustrated because issues of race were being given short shrift, noted however that "it's really amazing to see the way movements are inspiring one another globally. Like what's happening in Africa right now, and in Greece. So I think globally right now, it's really multi-racial, and even in New York it feels more multi-racial than Portland to me."

Other Occupy participants readily admitted that Occupy camps were places where "isms" – including racism, classism and sexism – are inadvertently re-created. According to Jake in Occupy Wall Street, "There has been a lot of pretty amazing movement within the movement towards trying to reflect on these issues and within the park to create this space that is supposed to be an alternative to society. ... [The question is] how are we gonna address that in a different way than society addresses it?"

"Just because you start a utopian camp, doesn't mean all the problems that were there before suddenly go away," said 21-year old Occupy Oakland organizer Roger. Reflecting on the fall-out from his female friend receiving cat calls while walking through the camp, he says "there was a lot of discussion in the GA about that. A lot. ... And for one thing there was a lot more checking going on. As for actual consciousness changing? I don't know. We're all very – hurt people hurt people. We're all hurt in different ways."

The personal and collective traumas based on different aspects of individual identities indeed were a significant focus during our discussions about different types of inequality, disparities, and whether or not progressives should *explicitly* talk about race or be "race silent" in the current struggle against income inequality (see Appendix A, Sections 3 and 4). Generally speaking, Occupy participants and the other young progressives in our focus groups believed that class-based, racial, and gender inequalities are distinct from each other, and that an exclusively class-based strategy for achieving social and economic justice will be insufficient. Alex, a 25-year old white transgender Occupy Atlanta participant, articulated the intersections between different oppressions well, and the importance of communication across groups within the progressive spectrum:

There is racism and there is transphobia and there are acts that fit within those frameworks ... everything is interconnected within those isms, but at the same time we do have to recognize the differences that

occur. For instance I don't notice the experience of racism because I am white and my friends don't know what it is like to experience transphobia but we can talk about this upbringing [and a] common language that we understand about suffering. But I don't have those direct experiences. ... They are all interconnected and all different in many ways. And that is the complexity. You can't solve sexism without talking about racism or class or gender inequality. Like transphobia. Like sexism and transphobia are two huge things that are connected. You can't talk about race without talking about class. You can't talk about class without talking about race. It becomes this web.

CLASS, RACIAL AND GENDER INEQUALITIES AND DISPARITIES

Racial/ethnic inequalities and disparities have been only a small part of the national discussion sparked by the Occupy movement, therefore we asked our focus group participants if they considered three types of inequalities (class, race, and gender) to be essentially the same or different. In a New York City session, the following exchange occurred:

They are different. In each of the three categories, the main issue is disparity. In Occupy it's growing disparity in socio economics. And when you look at race and gender, sure they are huge issues, but those are not growing disparities, they are shrinking. If you look at this generation vs, baby boomers, the numbers are not comparable. Twice as many women in school. The wage gap for women is closing. 2010 is the first year that more women got Ph.D.s than men. The racial disparity, that too is shrinking. —Nelson, 27, Asian-American social justice volunteer (New York City)

I disagree. From where I'm coming from, all three intersect and there are different realities for different people, there may be more women in Ph.D. programs but if you break it down by race and ethnicity you'll see a racial and ethnic dip. And the same is true of income levels if you look at education and you look at low-income students of color and they have this thing where they look at 3rd grade test scores and they project how many prisons you need, that tells me the disparities are becoming larger, not shrinking.—Eliana, 26, Latina educational justice advocate

[When] we talk about class...we need to know that there are other intersections. In my work I think you have to focus on the topic we're talking about, but to go the extra mile to make sure those identities are in the dialogue. So if you're talking about class and it's just white people talking that's an issue because you're only going to talk about white people who are poor rather than people of color who are poor. We have to recognize our privilege in process. How do we be more inclusive of people who are people of color, people who are LGBT, people who are women? — Manish, 28, South Asian American male advocate (LGBT rights, immigration, racism)

“WHY DOESN’T AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH EMERGE MORE OFTEN IN OCCUPY MOVEMENTS?”

What comes to my mind [is] the term “after the revolution.” After the revolution we’ll address ableism and ageism. So when I think about what oppressions we are talking about on individual and interpersonal and structural levels is sort of in what ways am I ensuring that I am not “after the revolution” anyone or part of anyone’s identity. And I think amongst Occupy groups that there have been some extraordinary instances of “aftering the revolution” to people sometimes in violent ways, physically or otherwise. People refuse to ignore people and insist upon bringing in critiques of many, many types of oppression into the work that they do. — [Elliot, 22, white male Occupy Wall Street participant](#)

I think it comes out of privilege and a lack of a real analysis of how this movement can work and how intersectionality works and how solidarity works. And I think that is coming from people’s personal experiences that have blinded them from understanding other forms of oppression. And I think if we don’t talk about race it’s because it hasn’t affected you in the ways it has affected others. If race has deeply affected you then you want to talk about it because in their self-interest they want to fix this thing. We all want to

talk about economics because we are all f*cked over but we are all f*cked over by racism too, just maybe in more subtle ways for people with privilege. But it is a thing that unless it is at the forefront of your thought, for people of privilege it can get kicked back. — [Kristian, 23, white male Occupy Wall Street participant](#)

I think also ignorance is a big part of it ... ignorance as a lack of knowledge so there is a sense of ignorance and there are lots of people, and I have experienced this in many activist circles. There are people, white people, that are really believing that all the other isms will be cured if we cure classism and thinking that economic injustice is the most important, singularly the most important and really not having conceptual footwork where they can understand the patterns of intersectionality at all. It is mind-boggling and I think that is a huge issue also. — [Erika, African-American female Occupy Wall Street participant](#)

I spent a lot of time in Oakland and have kind of a home close to where Oscar Grant was killed and was there for the anniversary rally. But Occupy Oakland has from the beginning embodied a racial justice analysis because that is the history, where Occupy

Wall St. is predominately started by a middle class white group and now with Occupy Wall St. we are trying to incorporate a racial analysis and for you guys that was there from the start. There is such a profound history, there was a history in NY too, but for Oakland it was started with that strong analysis and created more opportunities for a stronger movement with racial analysis than in NY. — [Jake, 22, white male Occupy Wall Street participant](#)

The reason why [many Occupy movements] are not addressing various issues -- mainly gender, sexual orientation and race -- is that the movement is so fluid. We are constantly occupying these spaces and people are flowing in and out and people are saying, “oh we need to do this, we need to do that.” I keep hearing that the story circles are going to mediate conflict, my guess is that they have been going for a couple months and yes they need time to train, but [in] months ... we are gone from there and then occupy this place and switch to that place. ... So there are definitely things that need to be addressed but we are usually busy and constantly changing the game so much that it can be problematic to do all these things. — [Adrian, 28, Latino/white Occupy Atlanta participant](#)

THE APPLIED RESEARCH CENTER CONDUCTED NINE FOCUS GROUPS in five different cities (Atlanta, Baltimore, New York, Oakland, Portland) first, to better understand what motivates young people—particularly young people of color—to engage in progressive organizations and movements such as Occupy; second, to identify what young social and racial justice advocates see as the major barriers to the realization of their societal vision and goals; and third, to gauge the extent to which, and why, young progressives feel that an explicit racial justice lens is essential to social justice struggles.

As a result, we found that

- **The engagement of progressive young people of color in social justice is most significantly influenced by their own personal, family and community's experience.** Such activists are disproportionately motivated to engage by their own personal or family experiences and their community's experiences, more so than their friends/peers, a particular individual person or a book/author;
- **Young progressives of all races/ethnicities view a dominant ideology based on individualism as a major barrier to an ideal society.** The most frequently expressed barriers to an ideal society (that espouses community and cooperation) were the general public's lack of awareness (of history and political and economic analyses), and a dominant economic ideology that prioritizes individualism. Occupy protesters tended to use language that was more explicitly anti-capitalism than others, and also put noticeably less faith in the usefulness of ongoing engagement in traditional electoral politics.
- **Addressing systemic racial inequality is seen by young progressives as critical to advancing social and economic justice, but this must be connected to a strategy for simultaneously addressing other systems of oppression (such as gender inequities).** When participants discussed broadly the internal and external barriers to progressive solutions, most did not articulate the need for an intersectional analysis. But, when asked directly if a class/income analysis alone is sufficient in the struggle against economic inequalities, the vast majority of participants argued that an explicit racial lens (and connections to other systems of oppression like sexism) is key to the success of social movements.

As a result of our study, we offer the following recommendations to social justice organizations and leaders of all ages.

- 1. Create more opportunities for young people of color to share their personal stories and family experiences related to economic and racial inequities.** Opportunities for story sharing can be both internal (within organizational settings) and external (in community settings or the media) so that others can better understand the human impacts of social issues, make connections to their own lived experiences and create opportunities for engagement in shared struggles for justice. Work to develop, translate and disseminate stories by everyday people for everyday people.
- 2. Develop and use frames and narratives that offer clear alternatives to individualism and competition, emphasizing positive values such as unity, equity, inclusion, cooperation, caring, linked fate and shared prosperity.** These widely shared and deeply felt values can be conveyed through personal stories, perspectives and aspirations of young people of color.
- 3. Encourage conversation, learning and strategizing that explicitly address systemic racism, while also emphasizing an intersectional analysis to inform inclusive and equitable, place-based, contextualized strategies for social change.** Invest in discussions, interactive learning activities, and analytical tools that equip people with the deep and broad perspective they need to challenge multiple, interconnected systems of oppression. Create tools that equip young people with the skills to address race and other intersecting dynamics in their issue selection and framing, media messaging, strategy design, solution development and alliance building.
- 4. Build more bridges across dissimilar organizations and communities so that young people can build multiracial, intergenerational power through expanded awareness, analysis and allies.** Foster intergenerational, multi-racial, local spaces to continue to connect young people from Occupations with those from other kinds of social justice work, intentionally developing cross-racial relationships and political analysis. Forging mutual respect and working partnerships could strengthen progressive Millennials power and effectiveness in asserting their common goals.

1. The only person of color participant in that particular Oakland session made no comment about sharing the same level of detachment as the white participants. And while matter was not brought up in any other sessions, it may a question worthy of further direct inquiry.
2. Michael Hais and Morley Winograd, "Now Is the Time for All Good Millennials to Come to the Aid of Their Country," *Political Machine*, Sept. 6, 2011 (Lexis-Nexis Academic)
3. Luke Broadwater, Re-energizing young voters; As youth vote slips, Obama tries to engage 20-somethings, Republicans See an opening," *The Baltimore Sun*, Jan. 26, 2012
4. Peter Wallsten, "Obama seeks to be BMOOC once more," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2011
5. Matthew Smucker "Occupy The Progressive Movement: Why Occupy Should Embrace Co-optation," *Alternet*, http://www.alternet.org/visions/155161/occupy_the_progressive_movement%3A_why_occupy_should_embrace_%26quot%3Bco-optation%26quot%3B (April 26, 2012)
6. An analysis by the Institute of Politics found that the high sense of political spirit and activity noted in the years following 9/11 through 2008 is diminishing. "For example, in nearly every attitudinal measure related to the efficacy and importance of political engagement, the attitudes and opinions of Millennials continues to slowly grow more negative". Institute of Politics, Harvard University, *Young Americans' Attitude Toward Politics and Public Service: 21st Edition*, http://www.iop.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/spring_poll_12_exec_summ.pdf (April 24, 2012.)
7. While there was an element of self-selection at play with the focus groups, only about 40% of our participants listed a racial or ethnic topic as one of their most passionate social justice issues in an open-ended pre-registration question.

1ST SECTION: KEY ISSUES / VALUES – WORD ASSOCIATION
ICE BREAKER

Please write down on the index card in front of you, the first word that comes to mind when you hear the following terms

economy
election
1%
debt
organizing
networking
immigration system
criminal justice
racism

Well, the first thing we'd like to do is get a sense of what aspects of our society you all think need changing or even fundamental transformation, as well as what are the characteristics of the society you want to live in? The society that you want to leave your children or future generations?

-What should be the values of that (future) society?

-In your mind, what are the key barriers between our current society and that one that you describe.

2ND SECTION: PERSONAL HISTORY / TRAJECTORY

Please rank the top three from the following list, in terms of the influence they have had on your view of, and commitment to social justice

Individual Person(s) *Organization* *Religious / Spiritual Beliefs*

Personal / Family Experience *Book / Author* *Movie / Film*

Friends / Peers *My Community's experience* *Other influences*

[Allow a few of participants to describe their key influences]

Have you always been engaged?

What keeps some of your friends from being as engaged as you are?

3RD SECTION: UNPACKING INEQUALITY

The Occupy Movement has focused a fair amount of attention on economic inequality between the 1% and the 99%. How, if at all, do you think *racial* inequality and *gender* inequality are similar or different from economic or class inequality?

[Possible follow-up questions]

-For example, do you think these different types of inequality occur in the same institutions or aspects of society?

-Why do you think, even now in 2012, our social classes have the racial make-up that they do? (i.e., disproportionality)

-Do these three types of inequality call for the same solutions? Can race and gender inequality be solved by a “colorblind” antipoverty program?

4TH SECTION: TALKING ABOUT RACE

In the current struggle against economic inequality (e.g., income and wealth inequality and inequity), do you think we should explicitly talk about race, or should we avoid talking about it by focusing solely on class?

Do you think there’s anything in particular about [insert city name] that makes those discussions either more difficult or easier than in other parts of the country?

What sorts of arguments do you hear on both sides in your own work / life?

What do you think is/are the most common reason(s) some progressives don’t talk about race?

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