

Identity and political purpose: An exploratory study of popular education in the Homeless Workers' Movement*¹

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Abstract

The *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Teto* (MTST, Homeless Workers' Movement) is a social movement that organizes the working class in their struggle for housing and other social rights, with the occupation of irregular or illegally held land on the urban peripheries of Brazil as its main tactic of political action. Some people who are homeless who take part in an occupation become activists, devoting part of their lives to the movement's political project. This article begins by asking what kinds of experiences may contribute to bringing about this personal transformation. Situated at the intersection of psychology and education, it aims to describe the form of popular education carried out by the MTST and to explore its possible contributions to the construction of a political purpose. It also seeks to characterize the political purpose of activists in this social movement. Through participant research involving 52 field-observation sessions and a secondary analysis of interviews with 33 movement coordinators, the study suggests that the MTST constitutes a moral and political culture that acts as an agent of popular education. By engaging camp residents in a system of practices, symbols, norms, and material structures grounded in the values of social justice, solidarity, the common good, and political activism, the MTST forges its own mode of popular education, which may contribute to the construction of identities and purposes oriented toward social transformation.

Keywords

Purpose – Popular education – Political identity – Social movements.

* English version by Fernando Mirandola Boschiero. The author take full responsibility for the translation of the text, including title of books/articles and the quotations originally published in Portuguese.

1- Data availability: The entire dataset supporting the results of this study has been published in the article itself. The data related to the secondary analysis of the interviews can be accessed in their original form in SILVA, Helio Alexandre. *Sonhos e resistências: MTST e os testemunhos da luta popular urbana*. São Paulo: Autonomia Literária, 2023.

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<https://doi.org/10.1590/S1678-4634202652302149en>
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Introduction

I dream every day of my life, and I will keep dreaming until I leave this plane for the next, of equality. A society in which everyone can freely choose what to eat, can live with dignity, have the same educational opportunities, where everyone can live well. For me, fighting for social equality is a life goal, a dream I fight for every day. A collective dream, which I fight for with the MTST in the occupations, in the streets, everywhere, you know, to make the world a better place for everyone (Simone).

Simone migrated from Minas Gerais to São Paulo in 1997 in search of better living conditions. In 2005, she took part in an occupation organized by the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) on the outskirts of São Paulo, with the sole aim of securing decent housing for her family. She became one of the occupation coordinators and later a national coordinator of the movement, a position she still holds. Since 2005, Simone has devoted part of her life to activism in the MTST, one of the largest urban social movements in Latin America, which fights for housing and other social rights for the working class and uses the occupation of irregular or illegally held land on urban peripheries as its main tactic of political action (Simões; Campos; Rafael, 2017).

Like Simone, dozens of people who took part in MTST occupations became movement activists, identifying with the movement, sharing some of its values, and devoting part of their lives to its political project (Silva, H., 2023). This phenomenon suggests that participation in the MTST may contribute to the formation of a political identity and purpose associated with the movement.

Personal identity is a psychosocial construction that each person develops by exploring the self and the world in an effort to formulate a self-concept and define their values and position in the world. It is a coherent system of self-representations defined by the contents to which the person assigns central value and which, for this reason, organize their self-representations into a system that provides a sense of unity and defines their commitments and position in the world. Such content may belong to domains such as family, work, political ideology, religion, morality, and sexuality (Erikson, 1976; Schwartz; Luyckx; Crocetti, 2015; Silva; Araújo, 2024). When moral values (e.g., social justice and solidarity) are central to personal identity, a moral identity is constituted (Blasi, 2004; Colby; Damon, 1992).

A concept closely associated with moral identity is political identity (Porter, 2013), which concerns the importance, within a person's self-representation, of political involvement and values aimed at responding to collective demands expressed in the public sphere, such as civic participation, democracy, and ecological sustainability. Porter shows that adolescents' civic engagement is strongly related to their moral and political identities.

Moral values may also be anchored in personal identity through social identity. Social identity is a collective identity constituted by a social group's shared knowledge, principles, practices, and goals, as well as its members' sense of belonging. A person may integrate a social identity into personal identity insofar as they feel that they belong to a particular social group, regard it as constitutive of who they are, and therefore

assign value to it (Spears, 2011). Social identity thus becomes, for the person, a vector for integrating and expressing the values that define and guide the social group.

Purpose is a construct inseparable from identity. According to Damon (2025, p. 6), purpose “[...] is an active commitment to accomplish a goal that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.” In line with Damon’s perspective, Silva and Danza (2022) argue that purpose is a prospective manifestation of identity, since it is shaped by values central to identity formation and projected as concrete goals to be achieved through strategies of action carried out by the person. Political purpose, in turn, is intertwined with political identity and is defined as a high-level civic and political intention that demonstrates strong political engagement and political motivation beyond personal interests (Han; Ballard; Choi, 2019; Malin; Ballard; Damon, 2015). Political identity, however, does not necessarily produce concrete political action, whereas the concept of political purpose presupposes such action (Han; Ballard; Choi, 2019).

Despite the differences between the constructs, both identity and purpose are constituted by the contents that a person values most centrally. According to Silva and Araújo (2023, 2026) and Silva (2023), drawing on Piaget (2014) and Blasi (2004), values are constructed through the affective bond a person establishes with the object of knowledge (situations, people, norms, social identities, etc.), the meanings attributed to it, and the coordinations established with other personal values. A value becomes integrated into the person’s self-representations as part of a value system and may be more central or more peripheral to identity.

Thus, the construction of a political purpose entails the construction of moral values with political content that become central to identity and, consequently, guide purpose. Studies in moral psychology agree that the more central moral values are to personal identity and purpose, the stronger the motivational force of these constructs on moral action (Blasi, 1983; Colby; Damon, 1992; Hertz; Krettenauer, 2016; Krettenauer, 2024), including political engagement (Han; Ballard; Choi, 2019; Silva; Araújo, 2021). Conversely, involvement in prosocial action appears to contribute to the construction of values and their integration into identity (Cox; McAdams, 2012; Silva; Araújo, 2021) and into a purpose oriented toward citizenship and politics (Malin; Ballard; Damon, 2015; Han; Ballard; Choi, 2019). In this field of study, however, there is no research relating experience in social movements to the construction of political identity or political purpose.

In social psychology, research exploring the relationship between social identity and collective action shows that social identification with a disadvantaged group statistically predicts collective action and that collective action, especially when systematic, as in participation in a social movement, may engender a politicized identity (Simon; Klandermans, 2001; Stürmer; Simon, 2004; Pliskin *et al.*, 2025) and, consequently, a politicized personal project (Klein; Spears; Reicher, 2007).

In a meta-analysis of 182 quantitative studies, Van Zomeren and colleagues (2008) reinforce these conclusions and add that a politicized identity among socially disadvantaged groups has stronger effects on motivation for collective action than a non-politicized social identity. They also suggest that such an identity may be constituted through participation in social movements. The authors point to the need to investigate



how the social identity of a disadvantaged group becomes politicized. They also highlight the lack of research on participation in a social movement in real time and its implications for identity construction.

Within the sociology of social movements, international research (Holst, 2002; Kuk; Tarlau, 2020) indicates that activist experience within social movements is, ultimately, an experience of non-formal education that contributes, among other things, to the formation of political identity. In Brazil, studies of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) suggest that the set of political education practices, together with collective actions and the values that shape the movement's culture, contributes to the construction of a Landless identity (Caldart, 2001; Martins; Santos, 2012; Silva, A., 2020). Despite the importance of these studies in showing the links among social movements, education, and identity construction, the relationships between popular education and identity or purpose are not their primary object of investigation.

Our starting point in this article is the question of what drives the transformations undergone by people such as Simone between entering an occupation and becoming an MTST activist. Situated at the intersection of psychology and education, the article aims to describe the form of popular education carried out by the MTST and explore its possible contributions to the construction of a political purpose. We also seek to characterize the political purpose associated with this social movement.

Research design

A brief characterization of the Homeless Workers' Movement

The MTST was founded in 1997 on the urban fringes of São Paulo. As an heir to the MST, it adapted the latter's strategy of struggle for land to the urban context, becoming a central actor in the political arena by organizing thousands of homeless workers in the struggle for housing and linking this struggle to demands for other social rights and to the fight against social inequalities, with the common good as its horizon.

The movement's main political tactic and gateway for new activists is the occupation of idle urban land that fails to fulfill the social function of property established by Brazil's 1988 Federal Constitution and is therefore in an irregular or illegal situation. This tactic denounces noncompliance with the law and pressures public authorities to allocate the land for social housing (Silva *et al.*, 2023).

In addition to occupations, the MTST promotes a set of territorially rooted and wide-reaching actions in areas such as culture, education, health, food security, communication, and legal assistance. To pursue its political project, the MTST organizes its activists into working collectives, including political education, education, health, urban gardening and food security, technology, legal affairs, culture, negotiation, and territorial organization.

Homeless people constitute the MTST's political and social base and include not only people living on the streets, but also 5.8 million poor and precariously employed urban workers who lack decent housing, live temporarily in someone else's home—sometimes while subjected to physical and psychological violence—face imminent eviction and chronic debt, or even forgo other basic needs in order to pay rent.

Method

To address the aims of the study, we adopted a qualitative approach combining participant research with the analysis of life narratives of coordinators from the MTST's grassroots base, that is, people who entered the movement through an occupation.

Participant research involved the author's field participation as a member of the MTST's political education and education sectors over eight years (2017–2024), the final three as a participant researcher, simultaneously acting within the movement and conducting prolonged observations and systematic records of the structure, organization, practices, and relationships that constitute the social movement (Brandão, 1983).

On the one hand, a researcher's participation in a political organization that is also the locus of study requires a high degree of vigilance in maintaining analytical distance from the object. On the other hand, it is precisely the researcher's relationship and involvement with both the setting and research participants that make it possible to collect data that could not be obtained from a perspective external to the phenomenon under study. Moreover, beginning the research as an existing member of the movement made it possible to "[...] observe facts, situations, and behaviors that would not occur or would be altered in the presence of outsiders" (Thiollent, 1983, p. 83).

Fifty-two observations and field records were conducted through the author's participation in the following settings and practices: the daily life of occupations; assemblies with camp residents; meetings of the national coordination and state-level gatherings of movement activists; meetings and activities carried out by the education sector in occupations, popular preparatory courses, Solidarity Kitchens, and communities; as well as festivals, events, and political demonstrations.

Data from the observations and from the author's participation in the movement provided information about the MTST's popular education and political culture, as well as a series of clues regarding the construction of activists' identities and purposes through direct dialogue with coordinators and by listening to testimonies in different collective forums.

To enable a deeper and more systematic examination of these psychosocial constructs, we conducted a secondary analysis of the autobiographical narratives of 33 coordinators who came from the movement's grassroots base, compiled in the book "*Sonhos e Resistências: MTST e os testemunhos da luta popular urbana*" [Dreams and Resistance: MTST and Testimonies of Urban Popular Struggle] (Silva, H., 2023). The book sought to characterize MTST activists by describing both their life and activist trajectories, as well as the meanings they attribute to this experience. The narratives were produced from interviews conducted in 2023 that invited participants to discuss significant experiences in their life trajectories, their dreams, and their future projections. The sample comprised 27 women and six men, aged 36 to 65, from low-income socioeconomic backgrounds and distributed across 12 Brazilian states.

According to Heaton (2008), secondary analysis is a research technique that consists of using and reinterpreting pre-existing data originally produced in other studies in order to answer new research questions or further explore hypotheses that were not previously investigated.

The study of life narratives is one of the most prominent approaches in identity research (McAdams, 2018). Through such narratives, people select the contents that are most meaningful for answering the question “Who am I?” in the present, while referring to the past and projecting the future. Life narratives therefore make it possible to apprehend not only the values that organize identity and purpose, but also the life experiences that may have contributed to their construction.

The decision to study the narratives of grassroots coordinators was based on the fact that most did not initially approach the movement because of an ideologically motivated disposition, but because of the material need to overcome their condition of homelessness. Nevertheless, they became activists as a result of their experience in the movement. Furthermore, their high degree of social engagement and voluntary association with the MTST suggest an identity constituted by the movement’s values and social identity. In moral psychology, there is a tradition of research that seeks to understand moral identity (Colby; Damon, 1992; Pratt; Arnold; Lawford, 2009; Silva; Araújo, 2021) or political purpose (Han; Ballard; Choi, 2019; Malin; Ballard; Damon, 2015) by studying people recognized for their social engagement.

The secondary analysis of the interviews used a qualitative, microanalytical methodological procedure developed for the study of moral identity (Silva, 2020; Silva; Araújo, 2023) and grounded in the Theory of Organizing Models of Thinking (OMT) (Moreno *et al.*, 1998). An organizing model of thinking is a representation that a person constructs of an object of knowledge, whether the external world or the self. In this procedure, the following components mobilized by the person in representing the object of knowledge are identified inductively: (a) the elements abstracted from the object and regarded as meaningful for describing it, explaining it, and acting upon it. Elements consist of the contents mobilized by the person to organize a response to a given question; (b) the cognitive and affective meanings attributed to the elements; and (c) the coordination among elements and meanings, which forms a system of relations that is coherent from the person’s perspective (Moreno *et al.*, 1998). Coordination is identified when two elements share the same meaning or when one element appears as part of the meaning of another.

Three researchers proficient in the analytical procedure read all interviews and identified the elements, meanings, and coordinations in participants’ self-representations (for example, in self-definition, memories that promoted personal transformation, and life goals). Initially, we sought to identify: (a) which moral and political contents were mobilized as elements and/or meanings in the narratives, how they were mobilized, and how they were coordinated, allowing us to identify the contents spontaneously abstracted as most significant to participants’ self-representations—from which their values can be inferred (Silva, 2020; Silva; Araújo, 2023; 2026); (b) their correspondence with the parameters of political identity: the centrality of political values and political involvement (Porter, 2013); (c) their correspondence with the parameters of political purpose: civic and political intention, political engagement, and political motivation beyond personal interests (Han; Ballard; Choi, 2019; Malin; Ballard; Damon, 2015); and (d) whether the MTST appeared in participants’ self-representations, since this would indicate an identity organized around a political organization (Simon; Klandermans, 2001). This analysis made

it possible to derive organizing models of thinking (that is, types of self-representation) concerning political identity and political purpose.

The second stage consisted of identifying which elements and meanings were mobilized in experiences regarded as significant and transformative. This allowed us to identify which experiences within the movement changed participants' representations of the world and of themselves—in other words, which popular-education experiences were significant in their self-representations.

After 28 interviews had been read, saturation was reached for meanings corresponding to moral and political contents and to experiences regarded as transformative within the MTST.

The following sections present the results of the analysis of data from the participant research and the interviews.

Identity and political purpose in the MTST

Participant observations across different MTST settings and practices made it possible to identify the transition from a newly arrived camp resident to a movement activist. Once a homeless person enters an MTST occupation and erects a black-plastic shelter, they become a camp resident. They then share responsibility for the collective organization of the space, participate in meetings and assemblies, and receive meals offered free of charge every day by the collective kitchens. A camp resident may become one of the occupation coordinators if they wish to do so and demonstrate strong organizational ability. Taking on responsibilities and carrying out tasks regularly, together with interest and participation in collective forums and political-education activities, are among the factors that may lead to their incorporation as a movement activist. They then become part of one of the working collectives and are expected to meet criteria for regular participation in the movement's spaces, gatherings, and practices.

An MTST activist is someone who regularly participates in the social movement's practices, voluntarily devotes part of their time to them, and expresses both identification with the political organization and adherence to its values. Such a person integrates into their personal identity a sense of belonging to the movement, adhering to its political project, practices, and values—that is, to its collective identity. Simon and Klandermans (2001) use the concept of politicized identity to refer to a personal identity that incorporates a collective identity oriented toward the struggle for the emancipation of one's group and toward social transformation in the public sphere.

The excerpt from Joana Gomes's interview illustrates a type of self-representation (an organizing model of thinking) in which the movement's political identity forms part of her identity and purpose.

My dream is that everyone should have the right to housing, the right to have food on the table, the right for every child to be in school [...] The MTST is a way for us to make this dream come true. I want it to be on record that the Movement is struggle, so I am struggle (Joana Gama).

Joana mobilizes rights (to housing, food, and education) as an element and attributes to them the meaning of a personal dream. She also abstracts the MTST as an element whose meaning is a means of achieving that dream, demonstrating coordination between the MTST and social rights. The social movement also appears as an instrument of struggle, a meaning she likewise attributes to herself, explicitly linking the MTST to her own self. The moral and political values underlying the elements and meanings of her self-representation are social justice (associated with guaranteeing social rights), the common good (since these rights should extend to everyone), and activism (insofar as she mentions her organized political action). Joana reveals that her activist political identity is projected into the future as a dream she pursues together with the movement. This indicates a purpose that encompasses a collective political project shared with the MTST.

An MTST activist who, like Joana, adopts the achievement of the movement's political goals as a personal project and, as an activist, regularly engages in actions to achieve them has constituted not only an activist political identity but also a political purpose derived from it. This is a specific type of political purpose associated with acting as an activist in a political organization and with that organization's political identity. Let us consider two examples of self-representations in which an MTST activist's political purpose is configured, beginning with an excerpt from Simone's narrative:

I dream every day of my life, and I will dream until I leave this plane for the next, of equality. A society in which everyone can freely choose what to eat, can live with dignity, have the same educational opportunities, where everyone can live well. For me, fighting for social equality is a life goal, a dream I fight for every day. A collective dream, which I fight for with the MTST in the occupations, in the streets, everywhere, you know, to make the world a better place for everyone (Simone).

Simone abstracts equality as an element, attributing to it the meaning of a dream and of something she wants for everyone—that is, a common good. She also states that the struggle for equality is a life goal and adds that it is a collective dream in which she is personally involved through her work in the movement. She coordinates equality with the MTST by stating that her dream is pursued together with the movement. In this self-representation, the values of social justice, the common good, and activism reappear. The value of solidarity can also be inferred from her actions, which seek to help other people secure their rights. Because these values organize her self-representation, their importance to her identity—a political identity—can be inferred. Simone's narrative, corroborated by the fact that she is an active MTST activist, meets the definition of political purpose presented above and corresponds, to a greater or lesser degree, to the content of the other 33 interviews, as in Elaine's case:

For my future, I wanted to build a society of equality, affection, and solidarity, because we will only know what another person is feeling when we truly look at them. That is what the Movement teaches us: being supportive means feeling love for another person, living another person's pain, putting yourself in their place. I want to say that we really can change the world! The Movement

is an example of that [...]. Maybe I will not live to see this more humane, egalitarian, socialist, more united society [...] At least I am doing my part (Elaine).

Elaine evokes the values of equality and solidarity as a personal project and as part of the movement's identity by emphasizing what the movement teaches and the example it represents. She indicates both the integration of these values into her identity and purpose and the movement's role as a vehicle for that integration—that is, as part of the constitution of her political identity and political purpose.

All interviews met the parameters of a political identity and political purpose, evoking the MTST as a content that forms part of the organization of participants' self-representations. The moral and political values of social justice, solidarity, the common good, and political activism recurred throughout the narratives, although values related to religious faith, work, and family were also mobilized; these, however, are not the object of this study.

Moral and political culture as an agent of popular education in the MTST

Between entering an MTST occupation and potentially developing a political purpose, camp residents undergo transformations that result from participation in popular-education practices and experience in the movement (Gohn, 2011; Kuk; Tarlau, 2020; Silva *et al.*, 2023). But how, exactly, is the popular education carried out by the MTST configured, and how might it contribute to the construction of a political purpose?

As discussed above, constructing a political identity and, consequently, a political purpose involves constructing moral values with political content. In the inductive analysis of the interviews, whose empirical data are presented below, we identified such values in MTST coordinators' self-representations in association with—and through combinations of—different experiences lived within the social movement. Across the narratives, the following experiences were abstracted as elements and assigned meanings that directly or indirectly alluded to transformations in participants' representations of the world and of themselves: participation in (I) working collectives; (II) assemblies (held in occupations, communities, and neighborhoods); (III) political demonstrations; gatherings (periodic meetings of activists from a city or state); (IV) “*mística*” (artistic performances that ritualize gatherings, meetings, and assemblies); (V) educational activities on politics and other topics; (VI) celebrations (e.g., the movement's anniversary, June festivals, and end-of-year celebrations); and (VII) occupations. These experiences appeared regularly in the interviews, with gatherings having the lowest incidence (22 interviews = 66.67%) and assemblies and occupations the highest (33 interviews = 100%).

These spaces and experiences are structural components of an activist's incorporation into the MTST. They are experienced frequently and regularly and are articulated through the mediation of moral and political values, forming a cohesive system of practices. They therefore constitute what we conceptualize in this article as the MTST's moral and political culture.



According to Puig (2012), the moral culture of an educational institution consists of a system of practices, norms, symbols, and material structures grounded in values that shape the people who participate in it through regular and systematic experience of that culture. In the case of the MTST, an organization that promotes popular education under the aegis of moral and political values, we are referring to a moral and political culture as a potential agent of popular education, capable of contributing to the construction of political identity and political purpose through members' active participation in the set of practices, norms, symbols, and material structures that constitute it. Kuk and Tarlau (2020), as well as other authors (Martins; Santos, 2012; Silva, A., 2020), make similar observations when they describe the MTST's everyday experience and struggle as promoting Landless education and the "internalization" of the movement's values.

In the following sections, we describe the types of experience that appeared most frequently in the interviews with movement coordinators (more than 70% of the sample) and with the greatest degree of elaboration. We also analyze how these experiences appeared in participants' narratives and which moral and political values were integrated. The description of each experience draws on data collected through field observations as well as information extracted from the interview analysis.

The occupation

The occupation of irregular land on urban peripheries is the movement's gateway and the point at which a camp resident's journey toward becoming an activist begins. Once established, an occupation is organized around a central kitchen, which provides three meals a day to camp residents and community members, and groups of shelters (the "Gs"), each coordinated by a camp resident. The movement charges no fee or other form of contribution.

Conversations with camp residents and coordinators indicate that, as a rule, a camp resident enters the land because of material need; they are not, a priori, supporters of the movement, are not necessarily left-wing, and being there may even generate moral conflict. Yet after entering an occupation, the initial goal of overcoming homelessness may acquire other meanings. The camp resident may come to understand the occupation as part of a collective struggle for social justice. Andreia, from São Paulo, expresses this understanding of occupation as a tactic in the struggle for rights, grounded in the value of social justice:

The occupation is a place of learning, exchange, experience [...] What struck me most was this thing of sharing, of being together, seeing people staying and realizing what that meant. Even without understanding the struggle, you know? At first, we do not really understand it, but it is beautiful to feel that the more people there are, the better, fighting for justice [...]. I saw how a house can mean something beyond housing, learning more and more things.

Living in an occupation is a turning point on the path toward becoming an MTST activist. In addition to organizing collectively in the struggle for housing, camp residents begin to collaborate in building and maintaining shelters and collective kitchens; share

food provided by the kitchens; participate together in political-education activities and assemblies; and receive assistance from and participate in activities promoted by working collectives. Immersion in an occupation thus triggers an experience of collectivist and solidaristic sociability that creates conflict in the camp resident's representations of self and society, potentially acting as a driving force for learning new representations of society and of oneself (Freire, 2005).

In the following account, a change in perception can be identified in connection with recognizing solidarity and the common good as meanings attributed to the occupation. Bete associates the occupation with positive affects and meanings that indicate its importance to her, suggesting the possibility that these contents may be constructed as personal values (Piaget, 2004; Silva; Araújo, 2023).

The occupation changes us [...] Of all this, what touched me most was when I was there building my shelter and they came by and said, 'Folks, if you want lunch, take your homeless kit and get in the lunch line.' Then I thought, 'What do you mean, they are going to give us lunch?' They gave me plastic sheeting and bamboo to build my shelter, and they are going to give me food too?' (Bete).

Assemblies

Assemblies are collective forums held in occupations or in neighborhoods and communities. They bring together camp residents organized by the MTST to provide updates on ongoing negotiations with public authorities, set the agenda for the occupation and the movement, coordinate mobilizations, propose actions to be decided collectively, and analyze the political situation in order to politicize the social struggle.

Assemblies are a hallmark of occupations and, together with everyday experience in the occupation, make it possible to organize camp residents politically and generate a sense of unity and belonging by inviting them to participate actively in deliberation. The dozens or hundreds of people gathered around a common purpose foster recognition of belonging to a collective of equals and have the potential to empower people who previously considered themselves to have little capacity to bring about substantive changes in their lives and in society. The following excerpt illustrates this description.

The sense of collectivity in the MTST is something that marks our lives forever, this thing of having meetings together with everyone, talking and deciding things together, and getting information about things we did not know, learning through meetings and assemblies. Those of us who live in the communities do not know the rights we have, so we stop pursuing things because we do not know (Janja).

Janja highlights the sense of collectivity as something significant and associates it with assemblies by establishing relationships among the shared meanings of dialogue, collective deliberation, and learning. She also identifies "rights" as a key learning that results from this experience.



Political education is, in fact, a fundamental feature of assemblies, as can also be seen in the following account:

I went on Sunday to watch the assembly; Natália was leading it. That first contact was eye-opening. I felt such seriousness in those words, a way of talking about politics that we could understand. Then I wanted to come back (Claudinha).

Like Janja and Claudinha, several activists emphasize assemblies as an experience that, together with others, connected them to the movement, produced a sense of belonging to a collective and participatory forum, and generated learning about politics, corroborating Lucena's observations (2019). By producing positive feelings and fostering commitment, the experience of the assembly appears to be one component that may contribute to integrating the movement's values into the identities of camp residents and activists and making them part of their purposes.

Demonstrations

Political demonstrations are another key component of the MTST because they occur regularly as a tactic of popular mobilization aimed at achieving the movement's political goals. The following narrative illustrates how demonstrations appear in participants' accounts:

The first demonstration was very impactful for me, when I understood my role and our role in society. We are the majority and our strength lies in our numbers. We went to city hall and got what we wanted. This is how we secure our rights. In the movement, I came to understand the power we have without realizing it. The MTST gives us that power—the understanding that we really can transform things—and shows us that women can occupy any space they want, can be protagonists, have a voice, coordinate, do anything (Débora).

Débora attributes to the first demonstration the meaning of something impactful insofar as, together with the MTST, it brought about a change in her social awareness of the power of the political organization of the working class, of women, and of herself. In Débora's self-representation, the elements "demonstration" and "MTST" are strongly coordinated, sharing the same meanings.

Lilian's narrative follows a similar line regarding the collective empowerment generated by demonstrations:

[...] when [former president] Bolsonaro was about to be elected, we women had the feeling that we were going to suffer a great deal [...] When I got there [to the demonstration] and saw that crowd of women, I felt how much unity strengthens us [...] I got goosebumps all over, all those women united, the social movements united (Lilian).

The self-representations of both coordinators reveal the potential of demonstrations as a catalyst to recognize oneself as an agent of social transformation and to understand

the politicizing character of collective political action. This makes collective action an experience of popular education and an instrument for constructing political identity (Van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008) and political purpose (Han; Ballard; Choi, 2019).

Workshops and courses

Workshops and educational courses are forms of education in which a camp resident participates during the first days of an occupation and that continue throughout their trajectory as an activist. These activities occur regularly and may be promoted by different MTST sectors. The political-education sector, however, is specifically responsible for organizing educational activities aimed at the political formation of the movement's grassroots base.

Luciana's statement is prototypical of the recognition expressed by several coordinators regarding the importance of these educational activities in their life narratives.

In the educational activities we learn to know and value ourselves, to recognize our strength. We learn that we are poor because we did not have opportunities, learn about our rights and how to fight for them, that it is through collective and solidaristic action that we change our lives. We learn to read better, write better, understand politics. I was politically illiterate before I joined the movement (Luciana).

Several meanings attributed to the element "political education" can be inferred from this excerpt: a means of learning about one's own class position, rights, and the causes of inequality; and a means of self-valorization and empowerment oriented toward bringing about changes in one's life. In addition, Luciana abstracts her condition of political illiteracy as something that changed after she entered the MTST. The values present in Luciana's response were social justice, solidarity, and activism.

The empowerment described by Luciana is one of the meanings most frequently attributed to political-education activities by the coordinators, as can also be seen in the following excerpt.

The education I received within the MTST spared us from a lot of abuse. Today we have knowledge and we can make arguments [...] we are respected by the police, by public authorities (Márcia).

The contents mobilized in these excerpts appear in several interviews, from which we can infer the role of workshops and courses in constructing political identity and political purpose, including recognizing and valuing oneself as a political subject belonging to a particular social class; becoming aware of social contradictions; and developing the capacity for mobilization and transformation through collective action.

Although political-education activities are not the only component highlighted by coordinators as an agent of personal transformation and therefore of popular education, they exert an important influence on these changes by prompting the construction of different or new representations of the world and of oneself.

The “místicas”

“Mística” is a term created by the MST to refer to artistic performances (poetry, singing, dance, etc.) that ritualize gatherings of movement activists, commonly at the beginning and end of such gatherings and with political content. The MTST incorporated this symbolic device as part of its moral and political culture.

Usually led by the art and culture sector, the “místicas” invite all activists to participate. The coordination of activists’ voices and bodies produces a kind of collective contagion and a sense of unity. In addition, their political content, associated with the MTST’s identity and struggle, offers scripts, synthesizes principles, and provides models of action that can be assimilated as parameters for representing the world and oneself as an activist. The following excerpt illustrates how one activist represents the songs that make up the movement’s “místicas.”

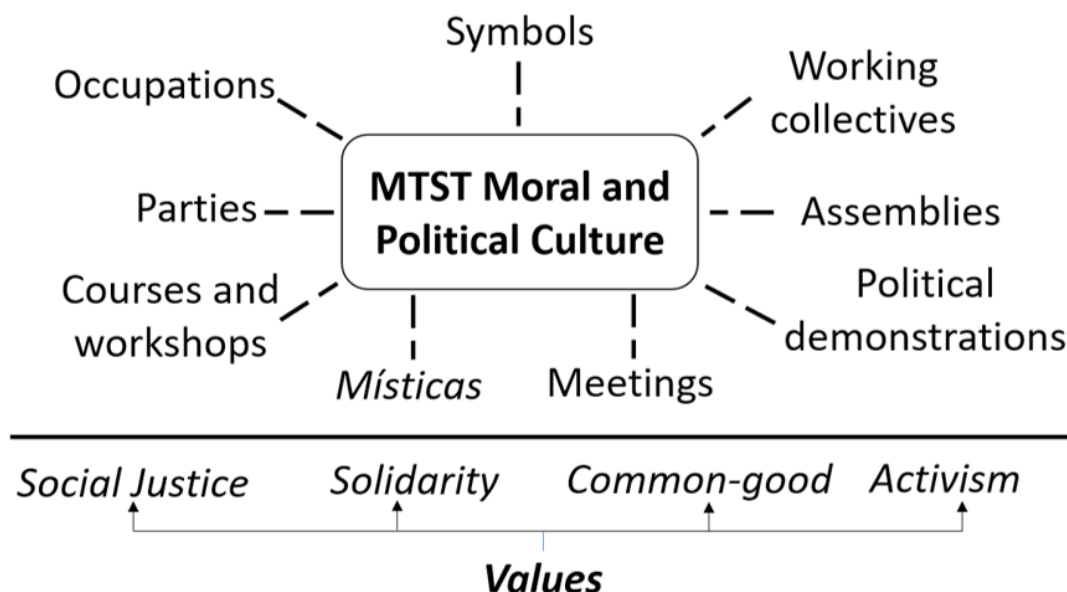
The songs are something that stays with you, and singing together makes us feel part of a collective; it gives us strength. The first time I remember was when they called us to an assembly and started talking and singing those songs, ‘old plantation...,’ and I thought, ‘I do not understand any of this, these slave songs.’ But later we understand, and understanding exploitation makes us indignant and gives us strength to fight (Gilvânia).

For Gilvânia, the songs appear simultaneously as an element that generates a sense of collective belonging and as a tool for political education, catalyzing motivation for engagement. The values evoked are social justice and activism. Like the songs, the other “místicas” are fundamentally aesthetic manifestations of MTST culture, with a strong impact on the affective dimension of camp residents’ and activists’ relationship with the social movement. They may generate identification and, consequently, act as a vehicle for constructing political identity and political purpose.

Discussion

The data collected through participant research and the secondary analysis of the interviews allow us to infer that the MTST’s moral and political culture is grounded primarily in the values of social justice, solidarity, the common good, and political activism. These values organize the components listed above which, together with the symbols that make up the visual identity of the movement and its occupations, form its moral and political culture (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – MTST's Moral and Political Culture



Source: Author's own elaboration.

The mobilization of MTST values and of the components of its moral and political culture in coordinators' life narratives reveals the influence of these components on the process of becoming an activist. Together with regular participation in working collectives, gatherings, and celebrations, the components described above structure a form of popular education that enables critical political education, affective bonding and identification with the moral and political values that guide the MTST, as well as a sense of belonging to a social class and to the movement. This creates the conditions for constructing a political identity in which realizing the movement's values and goals becomes part of one's personal purpose—a political purpose.

Studies in moral and political psychology suggest that social engagement in collective actions influences the formation of moral identity (Hardy *et al.*, 2011; Silva; Araújo, 2021), politicized and activist identity (Van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008; Zawadzka *et al.*, 2024), and political purpose (Han; Ballard; Choi, 2019; Malin; Ballard; Damon, 2015). Social engagement is both the starting point and the endpoint of activist formation in the MTST, the axis that configures its moral and political culture and makes that culture an instrument of popular education.

According to Pliskin and colleagues (2025), four subjective variables that may motivate collective action have received the greatest academic attention: perceived injustice when a person recognizes themselves as part of a disadvantaged social group; the sense that their action will be effective; the moral conviction that the action is legitimate; and a sense of social identity. The authors argue that one variable may contribute to the construction of the others and emphasize that social identity catalyzes the remaining variables, making it the strongest predictor of collective action among them.

As illustrated by the narratives, the MTST's moral and political culture appears to influence all four variables; beyond this, however, it enables the construction of a politicized identity, a psychological construct that, according to Stürmer and Simon (2004), explains not only occasional collective actions but regular political engagement in a social movement, from which the manifestation of a political purpose can be inferred.

The systematic observations and interview analyses allow us to systematize the popular education promoted by the MTST into several premises grounded in constructivist principles, which closely dialogue with Piaget's theoretical formulations (1967), adopted by Freire (2005) in his critical constructivism:

a) The social problems affecting camp residents are the starting point and endpoint of the educational experience;

b) Learning arises from the inability of camp residents' existing knowledge and values to respond satisfactorily to social problems and phenomena as presented to them by the movement, placing that knowledge and those values in conflict/contradiction and generating the need to construct new knowledge and values.

With this in mind, the aim is to:

c) Enable the problematization and critical unveiling of this knowledge, of the causes and consequences of social inequalities, and of the problems experienced by camp residents that result from them;

d) Confront individualistic ideology, its way of life, and its model of production with alternatives grounded in social justice, solidarity, and the common good, as materialized in the occupations.

e) Enable collective belonging and affective bonds with the values defended by the movement.

Final remarks

The transformation of a homeless worker into an MTST activist is a process influenced by a particular form of popular education promoted by the movement, which we synthesize in the concept of moral and political culture. By engaging camp residents in a system of practices, norms, symbols, and material structures under the aegis of values such as social justice, solidarity, the common good, and political activism, the MTST may foster the construction of a political identity organized around these values and a sense of belonging to the social movement. From the political identity of an MTST activist may

emerge a purpose that coordinates personal goals with the movement's political project—a project for social transformation whose horizon is the emancipation of the working class.

By exploring this phenomenon, the present study contributes to expanding the field of research on the relationships among identity, purpose, popular education, and social movements. However, because this is a qualitative and exploratory study, generalizing its findings requires further research that examines, in different contexts, how educational processes undertaken by social movements contribute to the construction of identities and purposes oriented toward social transformation.

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Received on October 23, 2025

Revised on March 23, 2026

Accepted on April 28, 2026

Editor: Profa. Dra. Viviane Potenza Guimarães Pinheiro Fonseca, PhD

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