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Subjectivities and the Space of Possibilities in Youth Programs: Countering Majoritarian Stories as Social Change in the Australian Context

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Abstract

The status quo of many not-for-profit organisations is well-intentioned service provision often coupled with an absence of critical understanding sustained by the restricting nature of neoliberal bureaucracy and funding. In this context, programs aimed at assisting young people from marginalised communities can become mired in individualistic thinking that constrains the space of possibilities for young people through depoliticisation and decontextualization of their realities and thus the kinds of subjectivities available to them. The challenge for the evaluation we discuss in this paper was not only to evaluate the outcomes of the program, but to promote community narratives about the realities for young racialized people in Australia that counter majoritarian stories. We conclude that social change begins within the multidirectional relationships and contact zones of the stakeholders, participants and researchers of youth programs. This means, extending the focus beyond generic youth development and moving toward engaging young people in critical social analysis and empowering them as future social change agents in their communities.

Keywords

Youth, subjectivities, narratives, racialisation

Subjetivitats i espai de possibilitats en programes juvenils: Contrarestar els relats majoritaris com a canvi social en el context

Resum

L'*status quo* de moltes organitzacions sense ànim de lucre és la prestació de serveis ben intencionada, sovint acompanyada d'una absència de comprensió crítica prolongada per la natura restrictiva de la burocràcia i el finançament neoliberal.

En aquest context, els programes destinats a ajudar els joves de comunitats marginades poden enredar-se en un pensament individualista que restringeix l'espai de possibilitats per als joves per mitjà de la despolitització i descontextualització de les seves realitats i, per tant, els tipus de subjectivitats disponibles per a ells. El desafiament per a l'avaluació que abordem en aquest article no va ser solament avaluar els resultats del programa, sinó també prooure narratives comunitàries sobre les realitats dels joves racialitzats a Austràlia que contraresten els relats de la majoria. Concloem que el canvi social comença dins de les relacions multidireccionals i zones de contacte de les parts interessades, participants i investigadors de programes juvenils. Això significa estendre l'enfocament més enllà del desenvolupament juvenil genèric i avançar cap a la participació dels joves en l'anàlisi social crític i empoderar-los com a futurs agents de canvi socials a les seves comunitats.

Paraules clau

Juventut, subjectivitats, narratives, racialització.

Subjetividades y espacio de posibilidades en programas juveniles: Contrarrestar los relatos mayoritarios como cambio social en el contexto australiano

Resumen

El *status quo* de muchas organizaciones sin ánimo de lucro es la prestación de servicios bien intencionada, a menudo acompañada de una ausencia de comprensión crítica prolongada por la naturaleza restrictiva de la burocracia y la financiación neoliberales. En este contexto, los programas destinados a ayudar a los jóvenes de comunidades marginadas pueden enredarse en un pensamiento individualista que restringe el espacio de posibilidades para los jóvenes a través de la despolitización y descontextualización de sus realidades y, por lo tanto, los tipos de subjetividades disponibles para ellos. El desafío para la evaluación que abordamos en este artículo no fue solo evaluar los resultados del programa, sino también promover narrativas comunitarias sobre las realidades de los jóvenes racializados en Australia que contrarresten los relatos mayoritarios. Concluimos que el cambio social comienza dentro de las relaciones multidireccionales y zonas de contacto de las partes interesadas, participantes e investigadores de programas juveniles. Esto significa extender el enfoque más allá del desarrollo juvenil genérico y avanzar hacia la participación de los jóvenes en el análisis social crítico y empoderarlos como futuros agentes de cambio social en sus comunidades.

Palabras clave

Juventud, subjetividades, narratives, racialización.

Marginalised and racialised communities are often problematised as *at-risk* or *disadvantaged*, and the subjectivities around youth from these communities are also encumbered with mainstream desires for their integration (Windle, 2008). The framing of integration “often diverts attention from racism by concentrating attention on the terrain of cultural difference, a variation on this theme emphasises social integration and material difficulties” (Windle, 2008, p. 562). While the circumstances of people from the African-Australia diaspora are challenging, “an exclusive focus on service provision and welfare needs continues to locate the ‘problems’ of refugees with the refugees themselves and as external to Australian society” (Windle, 2008, p. 562). Thus, programs aimed at assisting young people from marginalised communities can become mired in individualistic thinking which is coupled with an absence of critical understanding of racialisation (Coleman, 2020). The absence of critical understanding is sustained by the restricting nature of neoliberal epistemologies which seek to compress contextual realities into acultural, apolitical measurable outputs (Keast, 2020) and are often enacted by the logic of evidence based practice (Coleman, 2020).

Evidence based practice (EBP) and the problems of its assumptions has been critiqued elsewhere (see Fine,

2012; Trickett, 2015), but for us, it is the ways in which it constrains the space of possibilities for young people from racialised communities through depoliticisation and decontextualization of their realities and thus the kinds of subjectivities available to them. Hacking (2004) suggests categorizations create the boundaries for how we understand ourselves as being a certain kind of person, and it is largely through the human sciences that categories are created, measured and maintained. This “making up people” changes the spaces of possibilities for personhood “but our possibilities, although inexhaustible, are also bounded” (Hacking, 2004, p.165). Importantly though, people interact with these categorizations thus changing them in a kind of reciprocal way, or as Hacking (1996) describes it the looping effect. This notion gives meaning to both the agency of individuals as wilful subjects (Ahmed, 2014), but also acknowledges the power of categorizations and the discourses, institutions, experts and organisations that use them. Burman (2018, p. 188) in her conceptualising of “child as method” indicates the need to understand childhood as a category which is underpinned by “classificatory, regulatory, and normalising practices” that construct subjectivities. Reading youth subjectivities in these ways draws attention to “modes of childhood available within specific cultural-political con-

texts” and “enables attention to how children navigate and negotiate these, and acknowledges their necessary engagement with these” (Burman, 2018, p. 189)

Despite the often positive or aspirational tone of programs for young people from racialised communities they can inadvertently begin from a deficit framing which “disregards the assets that Black and minoritized youth bring to educational spaces, thus ignoring their agency—and thereby limiting the ways they are imagined, engaged, and educated” (Baldrige, 2014, p. 440). As noted by Baldrige (2014, p. 441), “deficit framing is directly linked to the current neoliberal educational market, which incentivizes after-school spaces to frame marginalized youth as socially, culturally, and intellectually deficient”. These narratives both justify programs and legitimize funding whilst at the same creating certain subjectivities about young people from racialised communities (Coleman, 2020).

The status quo of many not-for profit organisations is well-intentioned service provision, but these intentions can flatten criticality which is “needed but rare” and “pragmatic thinking and technical solutions such as logic models, evidenced-based curricula, performance management frameworks, and the obsessive counting of participants served have displaced critique of the status quo and imagining future possibilities” (Evans, 2014, p. 357). The challenge for the project we discuss in this paper was not only to evaluate the outcomes of the program, but to build understanding about the realities for young racialized people in Australia, how they navigate unreceptive communities, and what is promoting of constraining their capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004).

The aim of this paper is to explicate the approaches taken by the authors in the evaluation of a program developed for young people from the African-Australian diaspora in the western suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. This is not simply to offer a methodological vignette, nor to reproduce the outcomes of the evaluation, but to propose the importance of approaches that are both creative and values-based, and the role these approaches might have in unsettling dominant narratives about young people from racialized communities. We offer a brief selection of findings not to indicate the success of or not of the program but to illustrate some of the counter-stories produced through our evaluation approach and the possibility of those stories shifting some of the epistemic power back to the young people.

Lastly, we present the theoretical basis for our critical praxis and also some of the challenges we faced in trying to embrace Evans’ (2014) notion of community psychologist as critical friend. An important aspect of our approach was relationality and finding ways to engage with the youth organisation in order to foster collaborative learning and critical reflection that could become more foundational to the university-community partnership. Thus, the concept of critical friendship blurs some

of the more traditional ways of conceiving evaluations and these partnerships, but what we propose here is that this is necessary in order to enact change.

Values-Based Research

Values-based research seeks to show how programs give voice to the wisdom young people have cultivated “at the margins of institutional betrayal and economic/racial/sexuality oppression” (Fine, 2012, p. 355). Informed by values, methods are derived that can capture how programs have sought to foster “the embodiments of and survival skills honed in precarity” of young people faced with structural violence (Fine, 2012, p. 356). Methods that adequately explore the complex psychosocial and sociopolitical identities of young people placed at the edges of communities by discrimination and racialization (Futch & Fine, 2014).

This means there is an important multidirectional relationship between researchers, program facilitators, participants, and stakeholders (Dutta, Sonn & Lykes 2016; Fine, 2012). The products of this kind of research-based evaluation cannot be regarded as politically inactive objects that report decontextualized facts, but rather that they form part of the re-imagining of radical possibilities through organisational and systemic change.

One of the challenges as outlined by Evans (2014) in becoming a critical friend is having the time, energy (and we would add resources) to build and maintain community partnerships “that affords us the opportunity to function as critical friend” (p. 362). With increasingly short contracts, short timeframes for deliverables, and under resourced organisations and institutions this can be a significant barrier to the development of trusting supportive relationships required for critical friendship and this was certainly something this project faced. In brief, the interconnected attributes and functions of a critical friend are: co-creation of critical space, value amplification, problematising beliefs and practices, seizing teachable moments, sharing critical frameworks, critical action research and connecting community practice to networks and social movements (see Evans, 2014). Essentially these are to ensure as critical researchers we become “skilled at partnering with community-based organizations for social change without being co-opted into discourse and practices that simply maintain unjust conditions, or worse, exacerbate them” (Evans, 2014, p. 365).

The program and partnership

The not-for-profit foundation of a professional sports club facilitated a community consultation, part of a response to the racist misrepresentations of African-Australian diaspora youth. Stakeholders at this consultation included: University staff, community Leaders, African community business owners, parents and young people

from African-diaspora communities. It was also attended by representatives from state and local government, police, and school representatives. Some key challenges identified from this once-off consultation were:

- Schools – lack of engagement, high levels of pressure to succeed, not being able to offer support outside school times
- Stigma/Discrimination – misrepresentation of African-diaspora Australians in media, racism (explicit and implicit), workplace/employment discrimination
- Barriers – language, resources, school systems/procedures, financial (cost of activities)
- Unemployment/underemployment – lack of work and job-seeking experience
- Inadequate - lack of support for parents, programs not perceived to provide meaningful engagement/sense of belonging

This community consultation gave rise to the African Action plan and the 12-week program youth program was developed in response to the plan. The development of the program was very much informed by the state government's multicultural policy statement the outcomes of which were summarised by the program coordinators as: youth with positive self-identities, socially engaged youth with a positive connection to their local community, empowered and actively engaged youth participating in learning, education and employment.

In the program students aged 14-18 were paired with a football player and community mentor with the intention to increase student engagement and provide information about employment and training pathways and opportunities. It also aimed to build interpersonal and personal skills through the use of mentoring, workshops and a goal-setting agenda. Weekly sessions were designed to have three parts: a sports activity (30min), a workshop (1 hour) and a mentoring catch up (30min). Each weekly workshop and the activities were focused around specific topics such as: goal setting, improving self-esteem and dealing with stress, self-care and motivation, resilience and leadership styles, employment skills, which also determined the workshop speakers. Speakers came from within the organisation but also from external agencies (e.g. youth mental health and employment services). Sessions were led by program coordinators and/or guest speakers. The program also offered students opportunities to hear role models from the African-Australian diaspora tell stories of how they had navigated toward their futures, often through adversity and challenge.

The students were recruited via expression of interest, referral, or self-nomination and came from several different schools in the west of Melbourne. From questionnaires students stated that they were born in a wide range of African countries including, Egypt, Ghana, Sudan, South Sudan, Morocco, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and

Congo. The pilot of the youth program began in early 2019.

The university has an ongoing relationship with the foundation and the club. Various research projects have taken part between them, and it continues to be an important relationship to both parties. Program evaluations have been a cornerstone of this relationship and provide the foundation with an important source of institutional support for their various programs, whilst also providing the university with funding and opportunities for students to undertake placements and research projects. This evaluation was a part of a doctoral industry placement agreement between the university and the foundation. The placement supports a doctoral student to gain industry experience with a small stipend.

Collaborative program and evaluation design

A series of meetings between key program staff and researchers were held prior to the commencement of the program where conversations arose about the values that needed to be a part of the evaluation process. Values that would honour the community consultations, respect and promote the voices of young people from the African-Australian diaspora, and address the requisite policy directions. As researchers our work and values are centred around the awareness of power inequities and how we might co-create contexts, moments, or places that foster social inclusion. We work informed by justice that seeks to question and challenge the ways in which people are marginalised, racialized and de-advantaged by socio-cultural/political contexts, institutions and organizations. We also see enacting epistemic justice as centring the voices, experiences and expertise of those who are being marginalized. From the outset the researchers recognised that concepts and measures utilised for more traditional program evaluation may not be able to meet these values.

Meetings continued throughout the evaluation and were often more informal and occurred at moments before or after program sessions. During these researchers were able to: listen to program staff reflect on sessions, engage with staff about the ongoing development of concepts and ideas for the program, workshop problems or issues arising within or around the program, and to continue problematising beliefs and practices.

For researchers the processes of sharing critical frameworks can often involve undoing more mainstream, culture-free understandings of research in order to pursue more social justice oriented ones. In this case, the organisation's previous exposure to more mainstream evaluation methods, and the requirement for certain types of evidence which produced pressures to provide simplistic indicators of the program's success, meant the need for shared dialogues around concepts and theories that could underpin organisational change were key to the process.

One of the ways we aimed to share our critical frameworks was through providing literature that not only informed the evaluation process, but that could also be used to inform the ongoing development of the program. So careful consideration was given to the literature and concepts used and its accessibility so as not to alienate the organisation from the process of shifting some of the epistemic terrain within the organisation. The researchers used five main concepts to inform the work: the youth engagement continuum (Pittman et al., 2007), sense of community (SOC) (Pooley et al., 2002; Pretty et al., 2007; Sonn et al., 1999), sociopolitical development (SPD) (Fernández et al., 2018; Hope & Jagers, 2014; Watts et al., 2003) and capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004). By bringing these concepts to the project and our discussions with the organisation we endeavoured to start a process of change at an epistemological and organisational level. We sought to bring change to the ways in which programs and organisations might think and talk about young people and their futures. These concepts also underpinned the creative and qualitative methodologies used for the evaluation. While these concepts formed part of the final evaluation and were used as a way to frame some of the findings, ultimately, they were not all concepts adopted by the organisation. We reflect on some of the reasons for this in the conclusion.

Creative qualitative approaches

Although more traditional methods (observations, interviews, qualitative questionnaires) were used, we also applied Futch and Fine's (2014) mapping as a method. This method offers young people a way to creatively express the multiplicity of their subjectivities, their lives and the social support around them and to be a conversation point with researchers. Here researchers took up a more active, insider role in not only proposing the mapping as an element of the program sessions, but also in the delivery of the mapping sessions.

In weeks three and 12 of the program the students undertook their mapping sessions with a wide range of materials supplied for creating their maps (e.g. paper, paint, canvases, glitter, glue, stickers, stamps and an array of drawing instruments). Students were given the following instructions to complete their maps:

For this activity you are going to make something colourful and creative that illustrates how you see yourself in the world. You can use drawings, colours, symbols, words... whatever you need to reflect how you see yourself. There are no right or wrong ways so...**BE BOLD AND BE CREATIVE!**

We also invited students at the start of the program to complete a qualitative questionnaire which asked them

to describe their communities, the people who belong to them, and their sense of 'fit' in and importance of these communities. The questionnaire also asked them about the future and building a good life, and to describe what they imagined it would look like and what would help them build it.

Subjectivities and community tales of joy

As suggested previously, the findings presented here are to illustrate the counter-stories and tales of joy produced through the critical praxis and creative approaches outlined. While the outcomes of the program were a necessary aspect of the evaluation, the researchers were also seeking to ensure a just way of representing the young people and their communities. The evaluation was designed in part as a kind of epistemic correction (Malherbe et al., 2017) in that it sought to advance the creativity and voices of young people as valuable elements of knowledge production.

Figure one shows the artwork from a female student from their second mapping session and like many others from this session they were celebratory, colourful and focused on positive messages about their subjectivities, and/or their futures and vocations. This map shows the many intersecting lines of subjectivity in the student's space of possibility. Included in it are statements about selfhood that speak of power (e.g. BO\$\$, QUEEN), and also catchphrases of self-support (e.g. Be you do you for you, keep working there is light as the end of the tunnel). Intersecting these can be seen the words of career aspirations (e.g. TV host, paramedic, nurse). Figure two shows a selection of maps from other students and illustrates the creativity and expressiveness of them.



Figure 1. Student Map 1



Figure 2. Assorted Student Maps



Figure 3. Student Map 2

The student who produced the canvas in figure three made continual changes so that it evolved over the session. At first, she painted the entire canvas black, they then squeezed glitter of varying colours over the black background. When asked how this represented how they saw themselves in the world they replied, “the world is black, but it depends on how you look at things” (and pointed to the glitter). When asked did the glitter represent that they saw things as sparkly, the student replied “yes”.

Upon returning later in the session the student had covered the canvass in black again, obscuring the glitter. They told the researcher now it was about Instagram and fame and how simple or ordinary things could become “Instagram famous” like the now black canvas. Returning again, the canvas had been adorned with shaped sequins and feathers. When asked about this new form, the student replied it was about “layers” and that you “shouldn’t judge a book by its cover”.

Students expressed via conversations about their maps and in their interviews that their subjectivities were complex and contextual, and they spoke of connection to family, friends and communities as being central to how they saw themselves in the world:

Umm I guess, I feel like there are a lot of different types of communities that I’m a part of. So, like, for example, like, there’s my school community, there’s my like, sort of like family or like, outside of school community, sort of, like my friends and everything and my cousins and everything (female, 17)

Their communities were often understood along lines of ethnicity and/or country of birth and they articulated positive descriptions of their communities:

My people in my community are crazy. They’re really loud, like, they’re just really happy people. They dance, they sing, and like, because, like, people, most people I know are willing to learn that side of us, of course we’re going to be judged on the best way they just present us in the media (female, 16)

and the people in them:

Interviewer: How does the African community or African communities influence you?

Student: Oh, these ladies... so nice. They influence me, they make me feel, like, there’s like good African people out there and there’s always out there, there’s good people out there that can support you, you know, encourage you.

Their communities were also often described in terms of relational dimensions such as friends:

Participant: Oh, my friends. My friends are perfect. I like my friends. I love, I’m obsessed with my friends because they are, cause they understand me and like, they understand me and they’re always there for me...

Interviewer: Are you friends from African backgrounds?

Participant: Yeah, they’re all African background (female, 16)

and these relational dimensions were seen as key components of positive support for them which enabled them to imagine futures beyond difficulties:

Questionnaire: Please write down a couple of words that describe your community?

Student (Female, 16): Safe, fun, loving and caring

Questionnaire: In a few short sentences, describe the people who belong to your community?

Student (Female, 16): The people who belong in my community are people of understanding and communicating and people who are willing to adapt to change even though it may be difficult at times

Capacity to aspire: building a good life

Some students described their good life in terms of how good they would feel (e.g. happy, satisfied) and they imagined a good life that was safe, secure, and supported by family and friends, and afforded them the chance to be heard:

Questionnaire: When you think about the future and building a good life, describe what you imagine it will be like?

Student (female, 18): an environment where I can speak

my ideas to reality and to my heart's content without being judged or questioned why

Student (male, 19): a safe and happy life with my family whether it's my parents or my own children

Student (not identified): I feel like it's going to be good. I see myself helping others

Student (female, 17): I imagine it being so much more easier, being by myself and having my life together gives me so much joy and excitement for my future

Student (male, 17): to do well in my sport and be a pro soccer player, have a family and be happy

Although the students spoke of the personal effort, and character traits they felt were required to build a good life, there was also mention of the need for support; from family, friends, community and society. It was evident that they saw their future good life being one that was connected to supportive people:

Questionnaire: What things do you think are important to help you build a good life? Student (female, 18): to constantly act upon my ideas and if I need help then go and ask for assistance from those who are knowledgeable

Student (female, 16): good sense of belonging, spirituality, family relationships

Student (female, 16): Happiness, because its important, and also strength in the mind and hope so that I don't give up

Student (female, 17): hard work, being involved in the community, networking

Student (male, 13): by practicing, studying, connections to people

These, and other findings from the evaluation, became important counter-narratives to help shift the way in which young people and their communities are problematised. Some of the aims of this values-based evaluation was to challenge problematising beliefs and practices, and to use the evaluation process as an epistemic correction for the organisation and researchers. It is the tales of joy represented in the creativity and words of the young people in the program that are central to these aims.

Theoretical reflections

Racialized youth not only face the more obvious impacts of race-based discrimination and racism, but often these can be obscured or ignored in the pursuit of "objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). The voices and stories of racialized youth are erased by these pursuits and their experiential knowledge finds fewer places to land. This epistemic injustice is often supported by dominant psychological concepts of selfhood which are increasingly connected to neoliberal forms of subjectivity (Teo, 2018). Subjectivities which engender people as "autonomous, individualized, self-directing decision-making agents" who are governed to become "an entrepreneur of oneself; a human capital" (Türken, et al.,

2016, p. 33). These subjectivities of neoliberalism have made their way into a number of areas relating to young people, their education and their futures (Keast, 2020). These discourses paint a background devoid of the reality of the "intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). It is through the notion of universality that neoliberal forms of subjectivity can flatten the realities of these intersections (Teo, 2018). This creates a context for racialized youth in which they are faced with institutions invested in neoliberal discourses of meritocracy, suggesting that social and cultural mobility is attained through individual effort (Hodgetts & Griffin, 2015), thus enabling a majoritarian story which distorts and silences the experiences of racialised youth (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Put simply, the silencing impact of majoritarian stories form a part of a continued oppression through cultural imperialism (Young, 1990), albeit through the newer neoliberal narratives of personal success and attainment. For young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, structural oppression is often minimised and re-framed through ethnicized, community deficiency discourses or in a racialised, individualised way (Coleman, 2020).

Although there are several conceptions and descriptions of young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds such as migrant, refugee, multicultural, it has been found that these terms do not come from young people themselves, and risk oversimplifying the reality of young people's experiences (Wyn, et al., 2018). Subjectivities for young people from these backgrounds are often multi-layered and complex and require a knitting together of a range of socio-cultural/historical and psychological factors (Fine & Sirin, 2007; Jakubowicz, Collins, Reid, & Chafic, 2014; Sonn, et al., 2021). Subjectivities are often shifting and changing depending on both immediate contextual factors (e.g., school versus home), but also in response to wider contextual factors such as the media and political discourse (Fine & Sirin, 2007, Sonn, et al., 2021).

There are undoubtedly challenges for young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds in navigating subjectivities in Australia, but at the same time they are mostly optimistic and have a strong sense of belonging (Wyn, et al., 2018). However, despite this, their desire to "participate and contribute to a range of spheres is not always recognised or reciprocated" (Wyn, et al., 2018, p. vi). Research also shows that even though Australia's multicultural youth are highly engaged in education they experience higher rates of underemployment than their non-migrant counterparts and can experience financial hardship which may account for the fact that optimism about their futures declines with age and time spent in Australia (Wyn et al., 2018, p. ix).

Multicultural youth are likely to experience racism in a range of ways, with around 50% of multicultural young

people reporting experiencing discrimination, largely based around race or ethnicity (Wyn, et al., 2018). For many, “racism is both experienced and witnessed in public spaces, shopping centres, schools, workplaces, and when applying for jobs” (Wyn, et al., 2018, p.iv). Racism is also more likely to be experienced by students in senior school years and to negatively impact the wellbeing of these students, particularly females (Mansouri, et al., 2009).

Part of the experience of racism for these young people is also the way in which they are racialized through mainstream media. This is particularly the case for young people from the African-Australian diaspora who are regularly framed by mainstream media discourse as a problem group or as dangerous youth or youth gangs (Windle, 2008) and creates a dominant cultural narrative about them and their communities (Rappaport, 2000). The mechanism of othering through dominant cultural narratives has had a long history in Australia and has shifted from ethnicity to ethnicities over time, but it remains one of the ways in which groups are oppressively maintained as being *not from here* and/or in conflict with *Australian values* (Hage, 2000, 2002). Rappaport (2000, p. 5) suggests that part of the role of a community psychology seeking to engender social change is to “to reveal, by critical analysis, the ways in which some of these narratives terrorize”, but also to bring to light those community narratives which empower through challenging dominant cultural narratives.

Community narratives are “the text and subtext of culture and context” and understanding them is a way to “understand culture and context and its profound effects on individual lives” (Rappaport, 2000, p. 6). They speak of what it means to be a member of a certain community, and what is important about belonging to that community. One of the impacts for bringing these narratives to light is so “those injured by racism and other forms of oppression discover they are not alone in their marginality” and that in the sharing of their own narratives (both personal and community) they become “empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed, and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27).

Concluding Comments

Social change begins within the multidirectional relationships and contact zones of the stakeholders, participants and researchers of youth programs. For programs to move beyond service delivery and toward systemic change they should engage in the sociopolitical development of young people. This means, extending the focus beyond generic youth development such as building leadership or wellbeing and moving toward engaging young people in critical social analysis and empowering them as future

social change agents in their communities. Program foci needs to acknowledge the reality of the contexts which racialize certain young people and that through sociopolitical development they can build capacities for civic engagement and social action. This should include programs fostering and promoting tales of joy that counter majoritarian stories and provides valuable solidarity for young people and their communities.

Critical friendships should also extend to those between agencies and communities thus allowing for on-going co-design and development of future programs so they are meaningfully anchored in the realities of communities. While the researchers acknowledge the limits of resources often available to programs, our experience highlights how vital it is for programs to understand who participants and their communities are, and what those communities mean to them. To achieve a balance between flexibility and structure, programs need to have well-developed and evidenced models of youth engagement that can inform the best strategies for program delivery, rather than fulfilling bureaucratic needs for *evidence* and funding.

The contact zone between universities and agencies is where values based practices and methodologies should emerge. This ensures social change is not simply an imposed ideal but one that is cultivated and enacted. From a research perspective this includes moving toward creative methodologies that can advance self-representation of young people, advocate their capacities to aspire and to open up the space of possibilities.

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