

## “It’s Got To Be Us”: Urban Youthworkers

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This paper explores the social and political theory-making of adults who work with urban youth of color, based on in-depth interviews with sixty-seven youthworkers in eighteen U.S. cities. It focuses on their choice to do the work they do, their vision of adult-youth relationships, and their political theories of race, poverty, family, and youths’ behaviors. Their role is reminiscent of “race men” and “race women” in the uplift tradition, whose methods of work were dictated by their sense of commitment to and responsibility for their communities. The youthworkers have three distinct theories of the proper relationship between adults and youth, with different emphases on discipline, tradition, and the nature of youths’ worlds. Their analysis of race, class, poverty, and youths’ behaviors is examined in context of the “culture of poverty” theory.

In 1991 Mel King, Director of the Community Fellows Program in Boston, designed an interview schedule based on 20 years of experience as a youthworker and trainer of youthworkers. He traveled around the country asking community elders about their techniques for working with youth, why they do the work they do, what personal experiences inform their work, their hiring and training techniques, and how they became youth workers. The findings of this study represent the collective product of years of experience, struggle, and reflection.

This paper focuses on these youth workers’ theory-making. It begins with why they do the work they do. Then it examines their visions of the relationship between adults and youth, on which they take three quite different positions. Finally, it explores their political thinking on race, poverty, the family, and youth delinquency. Respecting the youthworkers’ suspicions about the veracity and exploitativeness of academic research, this paper attempts to create a multi-vocal text (Faris 1981, Clifford & Marcus 1986), by establishing a horizontal dialogue between research into and youthworkers’ theories and experiences.

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### Method

The youthworkers interviewed were selected through the extensive network of Professor Mel King's community development work. Contacts were found by snowball sampling, asking people in this growing network "who else does good work with youth?" The interviews were 1.5-3 hours long and the questions were open-ended. He conducted 40 interviews in 16 US cities. During the next few years, I conducted another twenty interviews in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area. I then analyzed the data and wrote several reports.

The youthworkers work in programs that include education, healthcare, recreation, job training, mentorship, economic development, leadership development, prison, culture, politics, community service, art, and violence-prevention. While some issues that affect urban youth are specific to ethnic communities, many of the problems youth face are common among communities. At the same time, as many urban communities become multicultural, youthworkers who may have worked with youth of only one ethnicity are finding their programs serving youth of several ethnicities.

While we sought out and have learned about issues affecting Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, whites, and both young men and young women, the sample most fully represents African American elders who work primarily with African American young men. African Americans were 53% of the sample and African American men over 40 years of age were 36% of the sample. While 18% of the interviews were with Asian American youthworkers, six of the eleven Asian Americans workers work in organizations primarily serving African Americans and/or Latina/os. Of the remaining five interviews with Asian American workers, each was from a different Asian ethnic group and discussed very different issues. Six percent of the interviews were with Latina/o youthworkers and they did work with Latina/o youth. Thirteen percent of the youthworkers interviewed were white workers in organizations that serve African American and Latina/o youth.

#### *Why do you do this work?*

Ethnographer Elijah Anderson (1990) blames the "decline of the Black community" on the loss of status and participation of "old heads" (elders) of the community and decries the loss of the middle class to the suburbs

following housing desegregation.<sup>1</sup> Mitchell Duneier (1992) agrees. Other researchers challenge this characterization of urban neighborhoods. Historian Stephanie Coontz recognizes the “loss of the middle class” theory as “a trend characterizing the period since 1970” but she says this trend must not “be misunderstood as the primary cause of deterioration” of urban communities of color. “Most of the concentration of poverty in the inner cities is a result of job and income loss there, not the mobility of moderate-income Blacks.” (1992: 245-6) Other researchers report that suburban flight has not damaged urban social institutions as people spend a great deal of time in their former neighborhoods. Others emphasize that even very low income communities do their best to provide for the youth. (Heath & McLaughlin, ed., 1993: 48, 51, Clarke-Ekong 1994).

The most outstanding feature of youthworkers’ discussion of their work was their understanding that their work is *necessary*. This leads them to act from a sense of collective responsibility for the children of the community in the tradition of “race men” and “race women” described by Gilkes (1988, 1994). An African American male youthworker explained that he used to be a school teacher and realized that “the end product wasn’t coming out...it’s not enough for me to be a teacher 188 days a year, 55 minutes a day they’re with me.” A Milwaukee youthworker says “it’s going to have to be us”. And he says why:

I *continuously* talk to these kids. Sometimes it looks like I’m talking to a deaf ear. But all we can do is continuously talk to them and maybe somewhere down the line it will sink in. A lot of people talk about giving up. I say we *cannot* give up because those kids are *definitely* our future...If it’s broken then we *better* fix it. We *better* fix it.

In the above excerpt, this youthworker explains that doing what he can is necessary no matter how bad things look. An African American male

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Anderson applies a different standard to African Americans who have moved to the suburbs than he does to African Americans, Asian Americans, and whites living in adjacent urban middle- and upper-income neighborhoods. These people are appear in his book only as “victims” of the “ghetto” youth, not as adults with responsibilities to the city’s youth. Such omissions legitimate middle-class individualistic values, in contrast to the youthworkers’ communal sense of responsibility. It is also important to note that Anderson and others’ assertion of cross-class responsibilities are not raised with regard to child-rearing in white communities.

youthworker says that he doesn't know his work will be effective because doing youthwork is like planting seeds. He uses this analogy to explain that you do what you can and "hope that they grow and bear fruit". Unlike program evaluations that look only at production and efficiency, in his view the work must be done however tiny the visible effects.

Youthworkers talk about the shortage of adults available to work with youth and they try to get parents involved. But the center of their work is taking up the task of raising the children of the community. Many youthworkers repeat the statement "all the children are our children", by Khalil Gibran. They also quote a proverb which says "it takes the whole village to raise a child". People attribute this proverb to African and Native American traditions. As adults, these youthworkers believe they must take responsibility for raising *all* the children. An African American male youthworker puts into words the perspectives of other youthworkers by saying "See, that's our mission here and my mission. 'To whom much is given, much is expected'." Referring to the gang war in Los Angeles, a young African American youthworker says "The only person that could stop this war is us." Other youthworkers describe their attitudes toward their work:

- This stuff is going to kill us. That's the reality. If you love it, you live it, you're going to die for it. I don't want to die feeling I haven't accomplished anything. Someone else is going to pick up where I left off. I'm going to die for a child, because someone died for me.
- Why do I do what I do? I can't even begin to tell you, except that I don't know anything else to do.
- Reason I do what I do is because I believe that this is the right thing. I believe this is not my job. This is my lifestyle, the way it ought to be.
- Cause I know I messed up a whole lot of people's lives showing em wrong way to go so I think it's time that I start showing em right way to go.
- You gotta know the political understanding, we ain't just out here because we wanna be workers. We out here because we have a cause and we have values. We have a cause. We have a cause. Because it does not pay to be out here. It does not pay. It doesn't pay — all these years, can't even buy a house, right?

These statements indicate that youthworkers are driven to do the work they do by a sense of responsibility informed by cultural and ethical principles rather than by program evaluations or individual career goals.

The youthworkers consistently express a community-based concept of their work, as articulated by scholars of African American life. "Community control" is "taking responsibility" for your community through "col-

lective approaches to all community problems” and “from a personal perspective...understanding that you have not got it made until you can help others to get where you are and beyond.” (King 1981: 233-35) In her analysis of African-American values, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) explains the importance of leaders’ *personal accountability* for their work. Gilkes (1988) documents African American women community workers’ refusal to separate their professional lives as social workers from their responsibility and commitment as community members or “race women”.

Youthworkers see their work in the context of historical struggles for liberation in their local communities. This approach reflects theories that base social change on community-based movements. (Kennedy et. al., 1990) A youthworker whose program’s “largest site is a block from my house in my neighborhood that I grew up in the house I been in since I was ten”, describes his tutoring program in the local schools as “carrying on the work of Malcolm X”.

This community practice takes the form of one-on-one relationships with youth, about which youthworkers have rigorous definitions. The youthworker must show true “caring”, which they define as commitment, respect, and high expectations. Some youthworkers included providing a safe environment in their definition of caring. Youthworkers emphasized the importance of being *credible* in the eyes of youth, which is best accomplished by having been through the same experiences. But youthworkers took care to explain that an adult who is sincere and committed can be effective with youth even if they have not been through the same experiences.

### *The Relationship between Adults & Youth*

Youthworkers articulated several distinct theories about what the relationship between adults and youth should be. Some youthworkers believed that the role of a caring community adult involves discipline: “one of the greatest needs that our kids have is a sense that an adult person—male, female, doesn’t make any differences as far as I know—cares enough about them to at least confront them around their behavior, and without that they feel unconnected.” These youthworkers believe that rules and boundaries make youth feel safe and are part of having high expectations. A youthworker explained that “the simple fact is it requires *discipline* to be able to learn.” According to him, what youth need to succeed is the discipline needed to take on “roles and responsibilities” because they already

have “talent and skill”. He unites discipline and high expectations when he says “give me the time and give me the child, I can take and raise the expectations and I’ll give you back a man.” But some youthworkers never mentioned discipline. Differences emerged around how authoritarian youthworkers felt they should be.

The first axis of difference is gender. Men referred to physical punishment or the threat of force as an option in their dealings with youth. The women did not refer to this option. Most of the women stressed communication over discipline in their relations with youth. In addition to the gender difference, youthworkers’ approaches to discipline reflected different visions of the relationship between adults and youth, understandings of maturation, and goals for youth. Analysis revealed three different visions:

*Adults are in charge:* Some youthworkers believe in the need to return to a previous era of child raising, similar to what they experienced in their childhood. All the adults in the neighborhood should raise up a strict set of principles and enforce them, disciplining youth in the street. They see adults’ fear of youth as an abdication of responsibility. These youthworkers are concerned with “re-socializing” youth into a community with values such as the one they grew up in. This strategy draws on particular definitions of ethnicity and gender as guiding principles for the roles they want youth to assume.<sup>2</sup> Youthworkers with this perspective were least respectful of youth cultures.

*Youth know what they need:* A second approach emphasizes listening to youth. Some youthworkers believe that adults cannot fully understand youths’ lives and needs because of rapid changes and complexities, such as multiracial communities and identities, changing gender roles, economic restructuring, and complexity of racial meanings and messages in culture and media. They see youth as “way ahead” of adults. Because adults do not know enough, they must listen to youth and help them achieve their goals. Adults can be positive, encouraging, and provide skills and resources, but they can’t set the goals. The main commitment for adults is listening and being there for youth. This approach has the most respect for youth cultures.

*Youth and adults are in alliance:* A third approach proposes that youthworkers and other adults need to build on a set of old principles and

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<sup>2</sup> Heath & McLaughlin suggest that sometimes youths’ defiance or rejection of defined social roles is what concerns adults and youthworkers. (1993: 190)

ideas such as the extended family, “it takes the whole village to raise a child”, “all the children are my children”, and “to he who much is given, much is expected” but they look for and build new expressions of these concepts along with youth. For example, the extended family may look like a Boys Club or it may look like a group of youth caring for one another. The “whole village” may not mean an ethnic enclave, but a multicultural group of concerned adults. This approach is open to the possibility that gangs could be families.

Individual youthworkers may use more than one of these strategies. And not every youthworker could be categorized in this typology. The three approaches do clarify some of the questions and issues in how adults think about young people. The rest of this section explores the debates around these three approaches.

A New York youthworker, explains why he thinks *adults need to be in charge*:

There has been such an inconsistency on the part of adults and young people have been taken for granted in terms of their ability to perceive (adults’) inconsistencies...And (young people) just capitalize on those inconsistencies and I don’t blame them...They must know that we’re going to challenge them...We’ve got to correct them if it’s not correct. If it’s inconsistent with clear and conscious-minded thinking people, we gotta correct it. If we don’t correct it, we’d be remiss in our responsibilities as what our elders pass on to us...

The basis of this youthworker’s program is “love and *values*”. He says “when they walk in that door of the center...they’re coming in to an environment that’s different than they’ve been accustomed to. We’re not going to compromise on any principles.” He sees his “responsibility” as providing principles and consistent expectations, which includes both challenging the youth and maintaining his own integrity. High expectations go beyond youths’ performance and behavior to include their thinking. Adults have a responsibility to expect youth to think with a certain level of clarity and consciousness and to correct them when they do not.

This youthworker even takes a strong position on what youth wear, explaining to them that some of the styles of dress “come out of the penitentiary and we’re not organizing you here to go to the penitentiary.” He tells his youth which books, videos, and rap artists are “positive” and “give you that information”—the information youth need to get “back on the historical track”. He sees himself as a principled mediator or filter between

youth and the media messages. He makes sure they interact with the right information. He sees his role as exercising “adult prerogative”. Some youthworkers see this as providing stability amidst the complexity and ambiguity of the media and other messages which engulf youth. Another youthworker calls it “L&L, Love and Limits.” He goes on to say that the limits are “*really* high expectations.” Another male youthworker explicitly says that youth reject authoritarian discipline, so he teaches “self-discipline”.

Youthworkers relate childhood stories about how in their youth neighbors disciplined all the children of the community in the street. Many youthworkers explained that when they grew up discipline was provided both by family and community. A youthworker explains:

when I was coming up as a kid...Little old white lady next door saw me doing wrong she might have said something or might have took the belt to me...I'd just take it from her and hope she didn't tell my mother and father. Because if they find out then I get switched and you know we had to go pick all the switches. Now you hearing these parents talking about “well I'm scared of my child. I can't do nothing with that boy.” “I can't do nothing with that girl.”

This youthworker proposes that what has changed in the community since he was young is that parents and other adults perceive that the hierarchy of power between adults and children has reversed. He implicitly makes the claim that adult power was and still is based on the threat of physical violence. Researchers Elijah Anderson, Lynell George, and Mitchell Duneier tell similar stories. “On our block you would get chastised by any old lady....You had about twelve mothers, seventeen fathers. Everybody knew what you did.” (Duneier 1992: 61) An Asian American youthworker confirmed the tradition and pointed out that the reason it worked is that not only did the adults down the block discipline you, they also took you in and fed you and told you when they heard you did something good. (in McGee 1994: 11) In this collective memory, material and emotional caring *earned* adults the right to take moral prerogative.

Youthworkers taking this view of youth-adult relations offer a vision in which the whole community is raising the child, a vision explicitly put forth by youthworkers who say they are following the African proverb “it takes the whole village to raise a child”. Raising the children means keeping an eye on the street and disciplining youths' behavior there. A youthworker suggests that geographical cohesiveness provided a safer and more

secure environment: “Most of my life in Philadelphia, till about age eight...was spent *on my street*, within a two block radius...So we were all looking out for each other.” A youthworker from Los Angeles describes changed neighborhoods: “We’re not even friendly any more. Do you know your neighbors?”

Public health advocate Deborah Prothrow-Stith (1991) attributes youth violence in part to incomplete moral development. (Teens still frame the world as “good” and “bad”. Their capacity to empathize and see complexities is limited.) Since youth violence and other problems are based on *developmental* shortfalls, what is needed are programs in which adults take charge of youths’ development according to a specific model of moral maturity.

Critics of this approach argue that adult prerogative can be disrespectful to youth. An African American youthworker explains that twelve year old youth will come into his agency and respond to the structured activities by saying “Who are you to tell us what to do? I got to feed my little brother and my sister. I got to do the washing at home when nobody’s there. I got to do like my Mama would do.” An African American female youthworker points out that when white middle class teachers set behavioral standards for urban youth of color, “you’re basically telling them that what they are is not correct.” A white female youthworker recognizes that another youthworker she knows “keeps some hard core young men out of jail”, but she is uncomfortable with his relationship with young people in which “they will do what he asks because they’re afraid of him.” Youth members of Youth Making a Change talked about adults who try to control their behavior with physical abuse or restraint. They said repeatedly “just teach me...don’t tell me that I’m wrong, educate me.”<sup>3</sup>

The “adults are in charge” approach proposes a model of the lifecycle in which adults know what’s best for youth until they’re almost 20 years of age. In many of the African villages to which youthworkers refer when they say “it takes the whole village to raise a child”, children were advanced to adulthood through important rituals in their early teen years. Among the Maasai people in Africa, youth are advanced to junior warriorhood in generation groups. Such groups are explicitly defined as decision makers, leaders, and protectors. Status changes signified “junior war-

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<sup>3</sup> Focus group.

riorhood”, bringing new privileges and attention. In most societies, age rankings represent wisdom and authority that allow even 40 year-olds to be corrected by their elders; but childhood (as a time of nearly total adult supervision and control) ends earlier because there is no “adolescent” period. (Saitoti 1980)

According to researcher Christine Stansell (1990) the concept of “adulthood” was created in Western Europe as part of the industrialization of society. The new middle class pathologized the working class children they met in the streets. These children were often contributing to their family’s income by scavenging, collecting salable discards (“recycling”), petty thievery, and begging. Labeling and categorizing young adults was the first step in controlling them through a series of institutions: child labor laws, mandatory schooling, the foster care, and institutions for “emotionally disturbed” children. The controlling institution of school becomes the definition of success, culturally encoded in the admonishment to “stay in school”. Morality and health became defined by conformance to the timeline of institutional participation, so pregnancy in teen years ceases to be normal and becomes a sign of immorality. The extension of schooling into the late teenage years extended the age to which young people were considered pre-adult, and therefore in “need” of adult supervision. Most importantly, participation in adult society, status, and independent decision-making were delayed. American culture sees teenagers as incomplete yet also threatening. The view of youth as threatening contains a complex mix of age, class, and race ideas. As unruly street urchins have been vilified as pickpockets for over a century, skateboarders are now seen as a menace and their creative use of urban space is criminalized.

The “adults are in charge” approach to youthwork assumes that the information elders have is relevant and valuable to young people. Some youthworkers do not believe this is so. They think that things are different and changing so fast that *only the youth really understand* their situation. Researcher Christine McGee quotes a youthworker saying “We are learning that many things we thought were important, and that we thought would work, just don’t work.” A male youthworker says

They’re smarter than the previous generation, have access to more information and experiences...Don’t make them into you, into what you think they should be. Don’t try to live through them...In our program, they have their own council...decide what they need and what they want to do...

He says that youth have to be in charge because adults do not know enough. When youth are adjusting to a new culture and new social norms, parents often cannot relate because they are not familiar with the experiences. (This is exacerbated for immigrant youth.) Youth have to figure it out for themselves. Teachers in particular have been concerned about rapid change in youths' lives. A white female teacher talks about how she thinks about youth.

Maybe we...have to adapt to a world of people who can sit with a Nintendo for ten hours but can't sit in a classroom for ten minutes. Maybe we need to look at their world and what's going on....So then to expect them to learn like we learned 20 years ago, they're not the same kids....In a case like the school I teach at, almost ten percent of our youth are homeless....Even if we were naive enough to think that our world was ok, it's just not the same world. The problems are so much bigger....People have to make much bigger decisions, much bigger choices....What works is...to let go of all the values that you have....I really started to understand what was important to them and finding out what tools they needed to function in the world.

This youthworker says that adults must “let go” of their values in order to accept youth for who they are. According to this perspective, adults can't assume that anything from their world or their childhood is relevant to youth.

As researcher Max Elsmann (1994) points out, most youth programs focus on youths' “needs” rather than on their “wants”. The “needs” approach legitimizes adult prerogative while the “wants” approach privileges youths' own worldview and voice. From this perspective, education is made meaningful by demonstrating its connection to income and by offering it in a context that takes youths' financial concerns very seriously. Elsmann recommends “sequencing services so clients get what they want when they want it.” Work experience and income-generating activities could be offered at first and then followed by educational programs that will help increase earnings.

Youthworkers with more of the “adults are in charge” view respond by asking

Can it be possible that these young people know what they want? These young people, particularly —and I hate the word but I am going to use the word ‘deficit’— these deficit young people —they are resource deficit— we get them, they've had all these inequities and suddenly we come in with this

belief that they know what they want and that we should get out of their way and let them do it.

While I respect the concept, I am wondering at what point do I relinquish my role as a teacher, as a mentor, as a model, and as a responsible adult? There's a lot of inequities from which I, as an adult, suffer and suffered as a young person. There wasn't somebody to smack me on the head and tell me not to mess up, there was no structured environment. So where do we begin to tell the young people "ok go do your own thing" and where do we need to help?

Other critiques of "youth know what they need" raise concerns about young people "raising each other", "little boys teaching other how to be men", absent parents who let TV be the babysitter, the lack of extended family or fictive kin to take over from busy parents, lack of parental exercising authority, and a general lack of respect for community authority among youth. Most poignantly, youthworkers critical of this approach express concern that if adults do not help youth and require them to learn and acquire skills, youth won't have the resources to deal with racism and other forms of injustice.

Taking the lead from youth would mean treating their cultural forms and messages with respect even when adults might disagree with some of these messages. A youthworker asks where youths' values are from. Youth culture is shaped by elite decision makers at record companies, ad companies, and media conglomerates. For adults to play a role in teaching youth to question these images requires that youthworkers both respect youths' cultures and confront those aspects of youths' cultures that are oppressive. This mutual relationship will be an *alliance* rather than a moral apprenticeship. A female youthworker explains:

I have trouble sometimes saying "young people" because I feel like we're in it together and their impression is a little different, mine's a little different. I'm older. We laugh and cry a lot together. I feel like we're in this together. It's an exchange.

Christine McGee studies "youth/adult alliances" in which, as a male youthworker says, adults bring "experience, confidence and resources without dominating, without taking over." (1994) She explains that alliances are characterized by communication and collaboration. Communication requires youth being able to "speak freely" and adults "answering intelligently and positively". Building the trust necessary for communication requires both good listening from adults and that adults "open up to young people", as a female worker says, and be willing to share their own experi-

ences. Collaboration is youth and adults coming together to work on a common problem in which both youth and adults value each others' contributions. Adults do have knowledge that is relevant, and should raise "issues of which young people would not necessarily be aware." In addition to caring and commitment, mutual respect and a sense of unity of purpose are essential for collaboration. An Asian American youthworker explains: "The assumption that the adults should make is that the youth has every interest as the adults in seeing that the community improves...(and) that they are truly concerned about their future."

McGee points out that other important components of collaboration are that the youth and adults both have "significant responsibilities"—particularly sharing of decision-making and leadership, and that they share fun activities. A female youthworker explains the need to "mix...up whatever you're trying to do with fun and laughter and friendship...loosen up and have fun." McGee's study even includes a section on common mistakes in youth/adult alliances. Her list includes:

controlling behaviors such as failing to listen to youth, speaking for youth, making decisions for youth regardless of how they feel, telling youth what to do; taking charge and doing everything rather than sharing roles and responsibilities...; not sharing information (based on lack of trust); not communicating between meetings (based on a mistaken belief that everything is going to happen just because things were discussed at a meeting); and not communicating or agreeing on purposes and vision. (McGee 1994)

Interestingly, the very first item on her list of "mistakes" is the "belief that adults alone 'know what's best for youth, and that youth don't know what's best for them yet'" (the "adults are in charge" approach). Another item on the list, the need to communicate between meetings, shows that adults should have some special awareness of the developmental needs of youth, while recognizing that youth can manage responsibility and play an important role in decision-making. Another female youthworker explains that youthworkers can coach youth by "getting behind young people and supporting them with their agenda, and helping them to form their agenda because oftentimes they don't have it totally defined." McGee's descriptions of adults as allies present a careful balancing of standing back and letting youth try things and knowing when to step in with information, guidance, and support.

Youthworkers with the alliance approach are willing to reorganize their messages to youth in ways that legitimize youths' values and world-

view, such as youths' emphasis on money. An Asian American male youthworker recognizes that rigid values and rules can foreclose some opportunities to really work with youth: "If 20 bucks you lend to the kid would mean that he would have a very positive experience going to the senior prom or something, you have to break some rules." By "getting into their value system", youthworkers can create new opportunities for connection and accomplishment. "My own training is we don't throw money at kids...But...four kids graduating within a couple of months that the school district cannot get them to do nothing in the educational area — a hundred dollars is cheap, it's really cheap, to get that level of progress in there...."

Another Asian American male youthworker explains that youth are not going to listen to adults anyway, so the best adults can do is get youth to think about their options. "Because they're going to do it anyway. You might as well let them know what they're going to get into and what the consequences are, what the alternatives are, and let them decide." Even traditional institutions have recognized the importance of listening and responding to changing generations of youth. A youthworker says that he knows that what worked before may not work today. He believes that the reason that Boys and Girls Clubs "are having some type of impact" is that "we're willing to change."

According to anthropologist Sandy Robertson, in African villages not only are all the adults involved in raising all the children in keeping with the proverb "it takes the whole village to raise a child", but also many aspects of development are achieved in peer groups independent of adult supervision and guidance. In mixed-age peer groups, youth socialize, teach, and watch over one another.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, in the U.S. adults seem to be in competition with peer socialization.

Youthworkers who believe that "youth know what they need" imagine youth as their hope for social change. Adults need to help youth develop power with total respect for the way youth are envisioning their lives and future. These youthworkers' sense of efficacy comes from admiring and trusting the youth. Youthworkers interested in alliances with youth believe in collective responsibility between youth and adults. They, too, seem to see young people as the center of hope for change. Youthworkers should give youth all they can in terms of skills, support, and information and

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<sup>4</sup> private communication, 1994.

commit themselves to working together *with* youth. Ultimately, empowerment of youth is the goal of the alliance. While all the youthworkers strive to build community, “youth know what they need” and “alliance”-minded youthworkers are creating new kinds of communities with youth while “adults are in charge” youthworkers seek to restore an old vision of community. It is interesting to note that in responding to a report on this project which articulated this schema, women youthworkers were quick to say that they see themselves in alliance with youth, while some male youthworkers expressed reluctance to shift from an authoritarian role.

### **Youthworkers’ Political Theorizing**

In describing their work, youthworkers analyzed the situations of youth in their communities. Their theories of race, poverty, family, and youth delinquency are particularly salient in the context of the politically charged issue of the “culture of poverty” and the increasing tendency to pathologize, medicate, and criminalize youth of color.

Youthworkers are very concerned about absent fathers and families that are not providing enough for youth. Some are concerned with the decline of the extended family, others with fathers who are in jail. Their views often echo conservative theories of “culture of poverty”, welfare as undermining the family, or broken homes as the basis of youths’ problems.

As films like *Boyz ‘N the Hood* show, you don’t have to be a neoconservative (Black or white) to equate Black female-headed families with disorder, savagery, and death and male-headed families with discipline, salvation, and success. Once again, children are stigmatized from birth as the pathological bastards of their mother’s presence and their father’s absence. (Sklar 1993: 22)

Meanwhile, researchers have carefully disproven the causal relationship between family instability and poverty (Wilson 1987, Zinn 1989, Katz 1989, Coontz 1992, Sklar 1995). As summarized by Maxine Baca Zinn, researchers have been able to establish no clear relationships between family structure and children’s ability to escape from poverty nor between poverty and “aspirations”.

The question of whether to blame families for youths’ difficulties affects youthworkers in complex ways. They must negotiate their own role in relationship to the families and to larger institutions that blame the fam-

ily and/or take its place. Youthworkers work to support families, work to disrupt pathological accounts of what is going on in their communities, and simultaneously work to hold families responsible for taking care of children. They recognize the influence of racism and classism on “dysfunction” and the inadequacy of state programs to address these problems. A Latino youthworker comments that “Kids, when they’re taken from the community and put in institution — soon as they step into the institution — that’s a dollar sign on that child. He’s worth more in the institution than he is out here.” Community adults’ desire to maintain control over the childraising institutions reflects their discomfort with the power of state institutions to control and shape youth of color.<sup>5</sup>

Negative views of single parents are omnipresent among youthworkers. But rather than demonizing families as exhibiting a “culture of poverty”, they respond by building alternative families in the community. An African American youthworker says

This model that we use says anybody, everybody, if we can get our hands on you, we’ll become your family...I have 110 kids in college and I’m paying for....There’s three fathers and a mother...We specialize in the gang-banging dope-dealing black male...We don’t even use the word ‘program’, we use the word ‘family’.

“Broken families” have been an explanation for youth problems for over a century. (Stansell 1980, James 1993, Coontz 1992) The popularity of this explanation continues today. Some youthworkers say they’ve never met a gang member who wasn’t from a broken home. “You find a gang member who comes from a complete nuclear family, a kid who has never been exposed to any kind of abuse, I’d like to meet him...I mean a *real* gangbanger who comes from a happy, balanced home, who’s got a good opinion of himself. I don’t think that kid exists.” (youthworker A. C. Jones in Bing 1991: 14-15) James Diego Vigil’s precise 1988 analysis of gang members’ life-history data concludes that the most involved gang members tend to have fewer men family members at home and (presumably as a result of lax supervision) had contact with “the streets” at younger ages. But Vigil’s analysis drops out the most powerful destructive influences on youths’ lives — the lack of employment opportunities, racism, language-

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<sup>5</sup> conversation with Garfield, a San Francisco youthworker.

discrimination in schools, and mistreatment by the police. Since these factors do not *differentiate* gang from non-gang youth, they disappear from the analysis.

In contrast, Martín Sánchez Jankowski's research refutes the claim that gang members come from broken families or cannot relate to their family members. (1991: 39) Similarly, of the gang members researcher Padilla interviewed, all had families who were employed. Only one family had received welfare. Padilla presents a young man's response to this stereotype: "People have a misconception that we're all hard, mean, and that we grew up in the streets and we don't know any better. These guys come from families that love each other. We come from good backgrounds." (in Padilla 1991: 9-10) The frustrations of discrimination, lack of opportunities, and the opportunities of the streets affect youth regardless of their home life. A youthworker from Los Angeles explains:

Everything in the home, I had that. Was going to church, my mother and father still be going to church and all that type of thing. But it was something that was so looking good in those streets, that I just had to go be a part of it. At that time there wasn't a lot of shootings...

Padilla explains that when youth watch their parents (many of whom are skilled) forced into menial jobs, they become angry and want to resist oppression and racism. Gangs are one of the few available avenues of resistance. The gang as a family refuses to be humiliated as members of youths' birth families have been.

Rather than rejecting gangs, youthworkers try to recognize the valuable things gangs are providing. Youthworkers refer to the alternative families, caring, and brotherhood offered by gangs and other youth groupings. A Latina youthworker described gangs' caring for members as "a beautiful thing to see". (see also Rodriguez 1993) A youthworker describes how she thinks about gangs: "A gang to me is an extension of the family....But when you put a group of young minority males or females together they are considered a gang and they are looked upon as being violent."

Starting from the recognition that gangs meet some needs, youthworkers analyze what gangs provide: Identity and pride, belonging and caring, jobs, and meaningful work to do "campaigning for my neighborhood". Youthworkers recognize that gangs are a community institution that must be treated with respect and understood in all their complexity: gang bullets may be life-threatening, but gang jobs are life-sustaining when there are no

other options. Youthworkers analyze how they and their programs could build a sense of family, a sense of belonging, provide a source of pride and identity (usually by teaching youth about their ethnic heritage and culture), and meaningful work (sometimes by politicizing the youth to become activists or hiring them as youthworkers). But it's very hard for youth programs to provide enough jobs.

It seems contradictory that youthworkers are acutely aware of structural forces of oppression that constrain the lives of youth of color, yet they repeat "culture of poverty" theories of broken families, declining values, low self-esteem, and lack of aspirations? As human services workers they are supposed to work on individual, rather than structural, problems. Or they could be permeated with the rhetoric of popular public framings of these issues. But there may be another explanation for their seeming duplicity with conservative political theory. This explanation is embedded in youthworkers' lament that traditional values from their communities about hard work and personal and communal responsibility have somehow gotten "lost". One of the most important values they seem to miss is the sense that people who make it are supposed to give back, a tradition known as "uplift" in African American history. "Uplift" recognizes that the struggle for individual achievement is part of a communal struggle and is only attained by the investment of communal resources. Each young person lifted toward knowledge and power is an investment in the future of the community. As Bernice Johnson Reagon writes, "Black teachers understood that if they managed to get a degree/ that degree put them in another class/ The only thing that did was make them more responsible for/ handling more material things to complete the delivery of/ goods to their community". (Reagon 1982: 87) This perspective may be part of youthworkers' sense of their own power and possibility for efficacy. They *need* to believe that community adults can make a difference for youth. Values, unlike the racialized economy and its institutions, seem to be within the control of the community. Skilled adults committed to "uplift" are the primary resource of the community.

This perspective also may help explain why youthworkers hold to the "adults are in charge" approach. It, like "culture of poverty" theories, locates the power in the hands of youthworkers and communities. Adults can make a difference by providing rules and values. This approach emphasizes the adult community's moral responsibility for youths' behavior. This sense of responsibility may actually be empowering to youthworkers whose communities are "bombarded" by various forms of oppression.

Youthworkers who believe that adults need to be disciplining youth in the street propose that the local community has the ability, power, and resources to raise the children and solve their problems. Mobilizing neighborhood adults to raise the children is a tangible vision with a clear plan of local action within reach of the community and not dependent on policy-making, enforcement, or outside funding.

Refuting the idea that youthworkers are ideological or rhetorical dupes, they unanimously and resolutely break with “culture of poverty” theory when it comes to the youths’ behavior. *None* of the youthworkers we spoke with believe that there are any “bad kids” or “unredeemable” gang members. In the eyes of these adults, youth defined by state agencies as “incorrigible” are victims, not perpetrators, of violence and dysfunction in their communities. Adults who see all the youth as their own children contextualize youth behavior in an understanding of histories of oppression and see the negative activities some youth are engaging in as resulting in part from anger and frustration at injustice — specifically oppression of youth.

Many of the youthworkers recognize that youth are striving for insurgency against the conditions of oppression, but powerful forces divert them from effective challenges. These forces include the ideology of materialism, the seduction of the media, and the way their energy is drawn into struggling with police. Youthworkers try to “save” youth from destroying themselves and each other and teach youth about true insurgency by sharing cultural history and political skills.

### Conclusion

The youthworkers we spoke with believed that the relationships and communities they try to build are guided by visions and values that differentiate them from dominant institutions and less effective youth services. The most important value, caring for “all the children”, means not writing any of them off. No matter how violent, surly, or difficult, youth are the children, youthworkers are the adults, and the adults are responsible for raising the children. Caring adults do not run programs that “cream” or select the youth most likely to perform. Responsible adults refuse to permit themselves to fear young people, because to do so is to abdicate their role in raising the children. As researchers Pittman and Zeldin emphasize, all the institutions of the village will be organized around the *development* of the youth, rather than about *detering* youth in the interest of adult com-

fort. People and institutions that are about development must nurture, heal, empower, and develop youth. (1994: 52-53) Youthworkers see that the burden is on them as adults to figure out how to raise all the children rather than simply blaming youths' behavior or families.

While youthworkers ignore structural forces of oppression somewhat in order to maintain a sense that communities have the power to save and raise the children, they are sometimes torn between honesty with the youth about the economic situation they face and nurturing the sense of hope that may keep a youth in school, keep him looking for a job, or inspire her to go to college. While a 1994 book on urban youth programs defines the landscape of youth and youthworkers as a struggle between "despair" and "hope", (McLaughlin, Irby & Langman 1994) the youthworkers we spoke with are painfully aware that opportunities for "hope" are structurally limited and that providing "role models" is not going to rescue all the children. A youthworker says "I'm tired of lying to young people. As adults, we lie to them and say 'if you do x, y, and z, you'll have the opportunity to do whatever you want.' And that's not true." Youth and youthworkers are unimpressed by professional "mentors" who drive home to the suburbs, particularly when role modeling programs replace needed services. (Vicuña and Greene 1994, Freedman 1993)

The most promising resolution of the dilemma about hopeful promises a context of racialized economic restructuring is politicizing the youth. Some programs are organized to nurture youth to be analytic, organized, and outspoken. (See Starr 1998) These policy-oriented programs provide skills, political development, and some networking in alternative job markets. Some programs called "job training", "educational remediation", or "self-esteem development" actually teach youth to analyze oppressive structures, tell the histories of struggles for justice, and struggle for their liberation. Youthworkers who get their sense of efficacy from developing and supporting youth as political actors believe in the youths' ability to rebuild the world and change what needs to be changed. This approach positions youth as political agents rather than victims and is more concerned with developing political acuity than false individualistic hope.

An Asian American youthworker explains the seamless relationship between political action and the actions of caring adults. Politics is struggling for justice against institutions, and it is also making sure that youth of color learn the values of their communities, the meaning of injustice, and that they are cherished members of their communities.

Because a lot of these kids don't have any significant relationship. And if you are that relationship in which they felt inspired by, then you have accomplished your task quite well, no matter whether they're gonna be locked up in jail or be homeless in two or three years, that they would inherit a sense of humanity from you, a sense of justice, of right and wrong, a sense of the world is ok, that they have a right to exist in it. That would be the important goal, the goal that would rationalize all the failures in your line of work.

The village is full of reliable adults ready to listen. These youthworkers are *family* to the youth, they're "like a mother", they're "uncle". Youthworkers are also *organizers*, drawing youth into community and into commitments, politicizing youth, and teaching them the skills they'll need to work together to challenge oppression and to build new institutions in their communities.

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