Acknowledging the Context of Youth’s Lives

A decade ago, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development challenged “traditional” youth-serving organizations to up their commitment to disadvantaged youth and improve their reach to older teens. Five years ago, the Annie E. Casey Foundation began a one-founder campaign to call for family-strengthening youth development, questioning the wisdom of “traditional” practices that minimized rather than reinforced the role of families as key supports in teens’ lives.

In another corner, the Youth Organizing Funders Group was started to support a new wave of grassroots youth organizations that, again, were challenging the credibility and effectiveness of “traditional” youth organizing in working with older youth in marginalized circumstances because of their inability to help young people understand, analyze and take action to change the larger contexts of their lives.

A future issue of Forum Focus will look at progress being made to engage and strengthen families. The last issue of Forum Focus explored the importance of youth activism as an approach for engaging older youth, summarizing new research findings that suggest youth activism is a powerful tool for increasing both personal development and collective engagement. In this issue, we continue to explore these dual themes as they relate to race and racism.

There is a common perception among policy makers, educators, social service professionals and funders that race and racism are increasingly less relevant in shaping individual outcomes. For example, foundation giving in this area is down, according to a recent study conducted by the Applied Research Center (ARC). In Short Changed, ARC reports that “grants to communities of color fell from a peak of nearly ten percent of all grants in 1998 to seven percent in 2001 — the lowest point in over a decade” and that “the number of racial justice organizations within the top 50 recipients of civil rights and social action funding diminished from 15 in 1998 to 8 in 2001.”

But race and racism are far from irrelevant in the daily lives of youth of color, white youth and all youth who struggle with or benefit from internally or externally reinforced stereotypes and institutionalized policies and practices that lead to differential expectations and treatment. Young people need safe places to explore the personal impact of race and racism on their identity and choices, deepen their understanding of the historical and current realities, and determine individual and collective strategies for action.

Forum Focus is a regular publication of the Forum for Youth Investment. Forum Focus is published five times a year as an insert in Youth Today. The Forum for Youth Investment is dedicated to changing the odds for children, youth and their families by sparking and supporting action to improve the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement in neighborhoods and across the nation.

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What opportunities and obstacles do the allied youth fields face in addressing structural racism? How explicitly are youth development practitioners working with young people to reverse the currents of structural racism in which they navigate? How can existing models that have responded to some of these challenges be replicated and popularized? What role might funders and other intermediaries play in promoting these efforts? Since early 2003, the Youth and Racial Equity Project (YRE) of the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE), funded by the Ford and Mott foundations, has studied “youth development with a racial justice focus” to address these questions. YRE uses an emerging analysis of racism as a “structural” phenomenon that reflects a long history of racially-distributed resources, an entrenched racial hierarchy that shapes our views of ourselves and others, and a broad range of policies and institutions that reinforce and reflect both.

PRE, working in partnership with mosaic consulting co-principals, Julie Quiroz-Martinez and Daniel HoSang, approached this critical issue by conducting three phases of field research to map the existing environment and identify ways for the allied youth fields to make racial equity a priority. They gathered information from organizations, programs and the literature; held regional convenings with practitioners, intermediaries and funders; and conducted organizational interviews and site visits.

Research and first-hand narratives show that youth of color are likely to experience racial discrimination and bias from institution-level forces, including education, employment, health and juvenile justice. Acknowledging that racial equity is a significant concern among young people and that, for the most part, youth development approaches to racial justice are underdeveloped, the YRE asserts that youth-focused racial equity objectives and outcomes need to emerge in ways that engage young people in structural analysis and action.

YRE points to a general trend over the last quarter century, even among those working primarily with youth of color, to view race and racism as less and less significant in shaping developmental outcomes. The project also acknowledges a second trend: support for the development of individual strengths and competencies for children and youth to “beat the odds” without sustained efforts to develop complementary competencies, such as political analysis and collective responses to harmful societal forces, at the macro “change the odds” level. YRE compares and contrasts the two approaches and uses the term “anti-racist youth development” for principles and practices that emphasize both growth at a personal level and transformation at a structural level. In sharing the voices of practitioners, who are admittedly still struggling themselves to determine the most effective practices, YRE emphasizes that these are emerging approaches needing greater support to both deepen and broaden the reach.

The YRE conversations identified several important strategies that youth organizations are currently using to address racism:

- **Confronting Racism Directly:** being intentional and explicit in working against institutionalized racism by teaching history, building awareness and providing opportunities to discuss race, racism and its implications.
- **Engaging youth in analyzing structural racism:** working with youth to develop solutions and examine root causes by connecting personal experiences of inequity with the related underlying systemic forces, for example, counseling young men about how to diffuse tense interactions with police and holding discussions about the roots of police abuse in some communities.
- **Offering opportunities for group action against racism:** engaging and supporting collective action by developing community action projects and campaigns.
- **Creating processes for racial identity development and healing from internalized racism:** supporting the individual exploration and healing that comes from self-reflection, recognizing the importance of culture, and offering opportunities to assess personal decision making.
- **Building common racial justice analysis among program staff and volunteers:** ensuring that staff have a shared vision about racial equity by cultivating an environment in which staff maintain a racial justice movement focus in common and a collective understanding of the role racism plays in young people’s lives.

Together, these themes present opportunities for acting on the shifts in thinking and practice currently needed to confront structural racism. The summary and conclusions from this project will be published in a final report called *Changing the Rules of the Game: Youth Development and Structural Racism*, which will be available this fall. Authored by Quiroz-Martinez, HoSang and Lori Villarosa, the report presents the findings of this work, highlights the voices of participants, offers a primer of key terms commonly used in discussions of structural racism and a framework, shown in Table 1, that compares traditional youth development and racial equity practices and the challenges for the different approaches. Through the YRE project, researchers and practitioners have issued the call to funders and to one another to engage in or increase “support for youth development work confronting racism from an institutional/structural perspective.”

| Table 1: Comparing Traditional Youth Development with Anti-Racist Youth Development |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Traditional Youth Development** | **Anti-Racist Youth Development** | **Emerging Examples** |
| Focuses on individual achievement and success, typically ignoring structural forces. | Offers an analysis of the racialized structures of power faced by youth and engages them in solutions. | • Tutoring and other skills-development programs that incorporate a structural racism curriculum. |
| Racism treated as either a minor or immovable factor in the development of youth, or often ignored altogether. | Racism recognized as an important factor influencing the life chances of youth and is addressed explicitly and intentionally in most aspects of program work. | • Projects where youth apply a structural racism analysis in research and take action on issues in their school or community. |
| Offers few action opportunities for youth or builds those opportunities around voluntarism and civic engagement. | Offers opportunities for collective action responses to individual problems and leadership roles for youth. | • Ongoing, structured opportunities for youth to explore and heal from the emotional damage of racism. |
| Staff may operate from disparate political analysis. | Organization prioritizes a shared and evolving anti-racist political analysis that informs program development and implementation. | • An intensive staff development process with a focus on structural racism issues, analysis, curriculum and approaches. |

Table adapted from *Changing the Rules of the Game* (forthcoming).

“I don’t think anybody can understand what it is like to be laid on the floor with an officer pointing a gun at them, simply because they . . . are in a black school. These are fears that students live with. I think the fears are why they are moving forward and changing things.”

— Participant in a YRE regional gathering

“If you say ‘racism’ to a young person, they’re going to think about a person from one race not liking people from another race. That’s how the term is used in the media and broader society.”

— Participant in a YRE regional gathering

“The sticking point that keeps youth coming back to our organization is that relationship to the community that is still around that racial identity . . . I know it’s true with the youth we work with, that the action of positive self-identity is a building mat.”

— Participant in a YRE regional gathering

“Research and first-hand narratives show that youth of color are likely to experience racial discrimination and bias from institution-level forces, including education, employment, health and juvenile justice.”

“Staff may operate from disparate political analysis.”

“Building common racial justice analysis among program staff and volunteers: ensuring that staff have a shared vision about racial equity by cultivating an environment in which staff maintain a racial justice movement focus in common and a collective understanding of the role of racism in young people’s lives.”

“Striking an effective balance between providing individual support and promoting youth leadership in social change.”

“Combining anti-racist political analysis with other factors and social forces (such as gender, sexuality, geography and class).”

“Tutoring and other skills-development programs that incorporate a structural racism curriculum.”

“Projects where youth apply a structural racism analysis in research and take action on issues in their school or community.”

“Ongoing, structured opportunities for youth to explore and heal from the emotional damage of racism.”

“An intensive staff development process with a focus on structural racism issues, analysis, curriculum and approaches.”

“Support for youth development work confronting racism from an institutional/structural perspective.”
PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

DANIEL HOŞANG, JULIE QUIROZ-MARTÍNEZ AND LORI VILLAROSA

or some working in the field of youth development, the realities of young people’s experience with racism demand that they remain engaged in an honest and creative search for real solutions. Bucking powerful trends in popular thought and public policy, and operating with few guides and even fewer resources, they are seeking to engage youth in recognizing, questioning and challenging the ideas, dynamics and institutions that keep the racialized “rules of the game” the way they are. They are struggling to develop ideas and practices based on an emerging understanding of racism as a structural phenomenon that reflects a long history of racially-distributed resources, an entrenched racial hierarchy that shapes our views of ourselves and others, and a broad range of policies and institutions that reinforce and reflect both.

In this context, the Youth and Racial Equity Project (YRE) sought to examine the thinking and practices — however partial or evolving — of organizations committed to working with youth to understand and challenge the structure of racism. The following two examples illustrate the multi-layered approaches these organizations are beginning to craft.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin:

Urban Underground is a four-year-old youth leadership development organization working primarily with African-American young people. For African-American co-founder Reggie Moore, who attended the YRE gathering in Chicago, finding ways to deal with racism “was not really a choice. I don’t think any group can take on community issues and not take on racial justice. It’s part of our mission and make up. It’s not an option to ignore it.” Putting this into practice means “our selection of civic participation projects is based on the personal connection or experience youth have with an issue based on their race. We have focused on black voter turn-out, police-involved shootings, police in schools, and teen homeless, all looking through a racial lens.”

According to 18-year-old participant Jovan Goodman, “I used to just think what politicians said made sense.” But, when the local sheriff argued that he could tell “by looking” who was a young person skipping school and who was a young person from an affluent (white) high school, “Urban Underground broke it down. They asked us how he could determine who someone was.” According to Goodman, Urban Underground is successful because they “ask you questions, then present you with information. And, we never just talked — we talked, then acted.”

“Before, I just thought things were equal,” concludes Goodman. “Now I’m informed. I know more how to change situations.”

Oakland, California:

Since 1998, Asian/Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL) has coordinated six distinct but interconnected youth leadership groups, each housed at a community organization providing services to a particular Asian ethnic group. AYPAL blends youth art/cultural work with youth leadership and youth organizing.

When asked to describe AYPAL’s approach to racism, Director John Fong tells a simple story of how youth of color do not experience racism simply as the biased attitudes of certain individuals, but as a racialized set of power dynamics upheld by policies and institutions. During an AYPAL workshop, youth were asked to describe instances when they were victimized by people of other races.

Over and over, youth cited examples involving police. As one young person commented, “We can handle it when other people try to mess with us. But what can you do when the other person is a cop?” According to Fong, AYPAL youth tackle racism through analyzing the racial dimensions of public policies and demanding changes in them. For example, AYPAL has led successful campaigns seeking ethnic studies programs and just treatment of students in public schools, as well as the creation of after school programs in local recreation centers. AYPAL also encourages young people to apply an understanding of racism in the running of the program. “Instead of just doing ‘-ism’ workshops, we ask the youth to come up with anti-racist governing policies among themselves,” says Fong. They start ‘checking’ each other in a way that is effective for the person being checked and for the person doing the checking.” Ultimately, Fong believes AYPAL has successfully blended youth development and youth organizing into a commitment to “youth ownership” where the learning and experience of young people remains as important as “the win.”

voices from the fields

FORUM INTERVIEW WITH SHAWN A. GINWRIGHT

Shawn A. Ginwright, assistant professor of Sociology and Ethnic Studies at Santa Clara University, is a noteworthy advocate for transforming and enriching communities to better support the lives of young people of color. His work includes developing a social justice youth development framework that examines the most effective strategies for supporting the needs of neglected youth populations and co-founding Leadership Excellence, an innovative youth development agency in Oakland, California. In this interview, Ginwright explores the influence of structural racism on youth development, public policy and society’s perception of young people of color.

Q: What does it mean to view youth development through a lens of institutional/structural racism? How do you communicate its relevance?

Viewing youth development through the lens of structural racism means developing an understanding of the racial barriers to healthy development. When you examine youth development for young people of color in poor communities, you have to understand that these communities are also shaped by such things as racial discrimination, racism in schools and police brutality. All of those issues have implications on how youth navigate their way through these communities. When youth development organizations examine structural racism, they scrutinize policies, attitudes and programmatic strategies that are informed by race and limit the opportunities for young people in community settings.

Much of your work is focused on the social justice youth development framework (SJYD). Can you tell us why you developed it?

Social justice youth development (see Table 2) came out of my work here in Oakland and being dissatisfied with existing youth development frameworks that were not addressing issues youth of color struggle with, such as their identity, violence and poverty. Because of my background in education, I was aware that the education field had dealt with issues of inequality, racism and structural inequality and identity in complex ways. The framework was the result of an effort to bridge some of the concepts articulated in education, but had not yet been applied in the youth development field.

Why is SJYD so essential when working with youth of color in particular?

One of the assumptions that this framework introduces is that young people experience the world differently, based on their identities. If you don’t agree with that, then the framework won’t hold up. I believe that if you’re a young woman, if you’re African American or Latino, if you’re gay or lesbian, or rich or poor, you have different experiences in the world. To that extent, we need to complicate and expand on this generic category of “youth” and add complexity by looking at the relationship between those identities.

If this is to happen, it will require youth development workers and policy makers to ask certain questions: What does it mean to be a gay, Latino or an African-American youth in this city or program? What does it look like? How are we responding to these particular needs? The SJYD makes explicit the role of identity and connects it to tangible programmatic strategies. It’s explicit and intentional about people addressing the role of identity in youth development work.

How can youth development organizations replicate the successes of SJYD? How can this framework...
help people working with youth come to understand the contextual factors that youth are facing in order to better serve them? Organizations can start by not only closely examining context, but also asking: What is impeding young people’s healthy development in this particular context? I’ve used the term “oppressive forces,” which denotes a young person’s exposure to violence and poverty, their lack of involvement in after-school programs, etc. If organizations understand the context, it makes the process richer. Organizations need to be clear and intentional about addressing it. Understanding and transforming oppressive forces are two different things.

Secondly, SIYD allows organizations to articulate and develop strategies for embracing youth as they challenge and transform these conditions. Not all organizations know how to organize young people. But even if you’re running a sports program, it’s important to form relationships with organizations that do social justice work.

Third, the SIYD emphasizes the relationship between identity development and community problem solving. For example, in Washington State I worked with a program serving homeless youth who, before they came to this program, were hesitant to organize. They didn’t want teachers or friends to know their circumstances. The program allowed them to be more empowered about their condition. Young people demanded that the school open up the showers at night and provide hot meals in the morning. Because of their identity, they were able to organize and ask for things that gave them a better quality of life.

Other ways to address this issue and integrating racially equitable themes into their daily practices will make their work more challenging or beyond the scope of their mission?

I think it’s a broader issue. Organizations need to step out of programs and look at societal-level issues. In a democratic society, we have to ask ourselves the question: How does our work contribute to a more equitable society? If organizations can’t answer that question, it makes it even more essential to organize and ask for things that gave them a better quality of life.

**Table 2: Principles, Practices and Outcomes of Social Justice Youth Development**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Potential Outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing power in social relationships</td>
<td>Reflecting about power in one’s life</td>
<td>Youth transforming public and private institutions by sharing power with adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making identity central</td>
<td>Critiquing stereotypes regarding one’s identity</td>
<td>Awareness of how sociopolitical forces influence identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting systemic social change</td>
<td>Working to end social inequality (e.g., racism, sexism)</td>
<td>Developing a sense of purpose, empathy for the struggle of others and optimism about social change</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouraging collective action</td>
<td>Involving oneself in collective action and strategies that challenge/transformation local and national systems</td>
<td>Building capacity to change personal community and social conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embracing youth culture</td>
<td>Celebrating youth culture in organizational culture</td>
<td>Authentic youth engagement, youth-led/run organizations</td>
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| Key Resources: Structural Racism |


