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Bridging Intergroup Difference in a Community Youth Program

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This article provides an intensive case study of a change process in which members of a youth program developed relationships with and altered attitudes and behavior toward diverse groups, including those defined by ethnicity, social class, religion, and sexual orientation. Latino and African American members of a community youth activism program were interviewed over a 4-month period, and supplementary data were obtained from participant observations and from interviews with the lead organizer. Qualitative analyses revealed a process in which youth were active agents of self-change. Their reports suggest three stages of change: developing relationships across groups, learning and discovery, and coming to act with awareness in relation to difference. The program facilitated this change not only by providing Allport's contact conditions and affording youth personalized experiences but also by providing them with critical understanding of the interpersonal and systemic processes that create marginalization and injustice.

Keywords: *intercultural competence; youth activism; adolescence; race/ethnicity; intergroup relationships*

I never thought about talking to people outside my race, but Youth Action taught me to give other people a chance, to listen to what they have to say.

—*Jamila, 16 years old*

Relationships among community members that bridge diverse groups—defined by race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and other forms of difference—are an important yet unrealized requirement for positive societal functioning. Increasing diversity in the United States and in many other nations further augments the urgency that people acquire the dispositions and competencies to form cross-group relationships (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenberg, & Verma, 2002). The period of

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adolescence is crucial to this objective because it is a significant turning point. On one hand, teenagers develop cognitive skills that increase their ability to understand others (Karcher & Fischer, 2004; Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002; Quintana, 1998). On the other hand, it is a period when strong peer-group alliances form and in-group/out-group behavior intensifies, thereby leading to further marginalization of youth from less powerful groups (Brown, 2004; Killen et al., 2002). Although teens may acquire the potential to better understand others, many youth in fact become involved in fewer cross-group relationships and thus more likely to engage in discriminatory behavior (Hamm, Brown, & Heck, 2005; Killen et al., 2002; Quillian & Campbell, 2003), including hate crimes (Steinberg, Brooks, & Remtulla, 2003). There is much at stake in learning how youth's potential for positive intergroup relationships can be realized.

Given the limited success of schools in fostering positive cross-group relationships (Schofield, 1995), it is important to identify and examine alternative settings to facilitate young people's experience of bridging differences. In the words of Fine, Weis, and Powell (1997), settings in which youth successfully form positive relationships across races "are rare and cry out for documentation" (pp. 255-256). This article provides an intensive study of an urban youth activism program, Youth Action,[1] in which young people worked on social action campaigns and, in the process, formed strong relationships and showed marked changes in their dispositions toward others across multiple dimensions of difference. Camino (1995) argues that a critical but neglected requirement to understanding this change process lies in capturing youth's experience of how it occurs—in real-life settings and from youth's insider perspective. Our objective in this article is to understand this process of change in context, as youth experience it and, indeed, as they create it.

This is a theory-generating article that uses qualitative research on one community youth setting to generate insights into how the process might work in others. We adopt the term *bridging difference* to provide an encompassing label for an active developmental process in which youth change their attitudes, acquire intercultural and intergroup competencies, form relationships, and alter their behavior—including, for some youth, developing commitments to counteract processes of discrimination and racism. The predominantly Latino and African American members of Youth Action in the research were from groups that are subject to interpersonal and systemic discrimination; thus, the study provides added perspective on how this learning process occurs for youth from marginalized racial/ethnic groups.

Literature Review

Cognitive and Social Processes That Generate Prejudice

To understand the process of bridging difference, it is important to start from knowing the obstacles to it. The fundamental cognitive processes of social categorization

and stereotyping represent major obstacles. During childhood, people tend to form typecast images of other group members that persist with little conscious awareness, activate biased processing of information, and tend to be self-reinforcing (Fiske, 2002; Fyock & Stangor, 1994; Stangor & McMillan, 1992). As young people move into adolescence, these processes of social categorization and stereotyping become differentiated and conscious, with positive and negative implications. On the positive side, adolescents in a neutral interview context report knowledge of people from different groups and the ability to engage in social perspective taking (Karcher & Fischer, 2004; Killen et al., 2002; Quintana, 1998)—capabilities that should reduce stereotyping. Findings from several studies indicate that adolescents report feeling that people should be considered on the basis of individual characteristics, rather than ethnic group membership, and most express disapproval of ethnic-related avoidance (Hamm, 1998; Killen et al., 2002). Other research, however, suggests an increase in the use of ethnic categories and stereotypes in adolescence, often in nuanced forms (Camino, 1995; Killen et al., 2002; Quintana, 1998), and that teens in their real lives engage in discriminatory behavior (Hamm et al., 2005; Steinberg et al., 2003).

Interrelated among these cognitive processes are group-level processes in adolescence that operate as barriers to bridging difference. First, the tendency for people to base friendships on similarity appears to increase in adolescence (Hamm, 1998). Second, adolescents' friendships become interconnected with peer groups and alliances that function in part to maintain divisions between youth, including divisions based on social class and ethnicity (Brown & Klute, 2003). The formation of group identities can create group norms that support negative stereotypes, avoidance, and hostile behavior toward out-group members (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Gonzales & Cauce, 1995). These separations between peer groups based on ethnicity and other forms of difference are often further reinforced by parents, residential segregation, and school policies such as tracking that reduce intergroup interactions (Clark, 1989). In sum, adolescents' cognitive potential to understand diverse others and overcome stereotypes appears to be trumped by their experience of navigating their daily social worlds.

The Experience of Latino and African American Youth

The cognitive and social processes associated with prejudice are especially nuanced and insidious for youth of color in the United States, who operate within a society structured on the basis of race. The racialized history and present-day reality of the U.S. social structure—including enslavement, racial subjugation, and cultural domination—render youth of color vulnerable not only to prejudice and discrimination at the interpersonal level but to systemic racial discrimination and oppression. Racial discrimination at the systems level is normalized through ideology, practice,

processes, and policy. Youth of color are not only subject to but unwittingly participate in this racialized system through the acceptance of and belief in the system's conventions (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). One consequence of such a system is the social distance that it creates between youth of color and White youth, as well as that among youth of differing ethnic and racial groups.

Much research has examined the intergroup dynamics between White youth and African American youth. Yet, much less is known about the intergroup dynamics among youth from different ethnic minority groups. Youth of color, though broadly labeled as racial/ethnic minority, occupy multiple positions in a stratified racial system, which may influence the relationships among them. To continue to limit focus to Black–White differences ignores the multiple complex ways in which a racialized system operates for and positions different racial/ethnic minority groups.

The small number of studies that have examined the intergroup relationships between African American and Latino youth show a mixed picture of the nature of these relationships. Several studies have suggested that in multiethnic high schools, friendships between Black and Hispanic youth are more common than those between White youth and members of these two groups (Hamm, 1998; Hamm et al., 2005; Peshkin, 1991). Work by Schneider (1997) indicated that African American and Latinos in a Philadelphia neighborhood perceive themselves as racially similar poor people while viewing Whites as the privileged middle class. From these studies, one might surmise that the occupation of similar social, economic, and political spheres and the common sociohistorical experience of prejudice forms a significant factor in the social alignment between African American and Latino youth. However, data from the Add Health Study, a large national study of 7th to 12th graders, show that although Black and White Hispanic youth develop friendships with each other more often than with European Americans, both groups are much more likely to form friendships with their own group (Quillian & Campbell, 2003). This finding suggests that processes are at work that limit interaction among youth of color.

Indeed, there is evidence that youth of color hold negative stereotypes of other ethnic/minority groups. Pulido (1996) found that among some immigrant families from Latin America, the notion of multiracialism is foreign and that many families bring negative stereotypes of African Americans. Similarly, given the current climate of immigration rights, African Americans may harbor negative attitudes toward Latinos, given the perception of scarcity of resources. Hence, although there seems to be much to align people of color, competition—rather than coalition building—may be dominant in structuring intergroup relations among people of color (McClain & Tauber, 2001). Youth of color who are exposed to and raised in such cultures may adopt these attitudes and values and thus rely on them when engaging in social relations with youth from other racial/ethnic groups. It is therefore important to understand how barriers to relationships among youth of color can be bridged, especially given their increasing numbers in the U.S. population.

Settings That Facilitate Bridging Difference

Efforts to reduce and counteract these divisive cognitive and social processes have typically been based on Allport's intergroup contact hypothesis (1954), which posits that for groups to develop positive relations, a setting must create four conditions for their interaction: cooperation between groups, equal status, common goals, and support from authority figures in the institutions within which this interaction occurs (see also Pettigrew, 1998). Research in laboratory and field settings generally confirms that these conditions reduce bias and lead to positive cross-group interactions. Meta-analytic results from Pettigrew and Tropp (2000) indicated that research samples that experienced all four contact conditions showed reductions in prejudice relative to comparison samples.

The limited success of schools—particularly secondary schools—in facilitating positive intergroup relationships can be attributed to the difficulties they face in creating the Allport contact conditions. School environments typically have an individualistic competitive ethos, which decreases the friendliness, trust, and candor needed for members of different groups to come together around common goals (Johnson & Johnson, 2000). Status hierarchies among students created by ability-based tracking and reinforced by in-group/out-group peer dynamics prevent students from seeing each other as equals, and they limit intergroup contact (Hamm et al., 2005). Even when schools make deliberate attempts to promote intergroup understanding, results are often superficial, owing to bureaucratic constraints and staffs' inexperience and discomfort in addressing diversity issues (Nieto, 1994; Yazedjian, 2003).

Organized youth programs are alternative settings in teens' lives that may be able to provide the Allport contact conditions and facilitate intergroup relationships (Flanagan, 2004; Holland & Andre, 1987). The activities in youth programs focus on group goals rather than individual achievement; thus, youth are able to build trust and relate to each other as a team (Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006; National Research Council, 2000). The smaller size of most youth programs, relative to schools, may provide better conditions for youth to develop personal relationships with members of different groups and come to see them as individuals—ingredients that have been found to facilitate cross-group understanding (Pettigrew, 1998; Schofield, 1995). When youth programs are located in nonschool community settings, youth may be able to interact on an equal basis, with less influence of the entrenched status hierarchies that develop in schools. One further advantage is that youth typically experience high levels of psychological engagement and agency in youth programs and may thus be empowered in these settings to be agents of change, including self-change (Larson, 2000).

Youth activism, or youth organizing, programs provide conditions that might foster the developmental process of bridging difference. These programs typically stress youth leadership and engage members in working together for community change (Lahoud, 2003; Lewis-Charp, Yu, Sengouvanh, & Lacoe, 2003; Sullivan,

2000). Beyond providing the Allport conditions, some activist programs include a training component focused on developing youth's ability for critical analysis of social processes. Participants learn to analyze power relationships and the interpersonal, community, and systemic societal processes that generate unjust treatment of different groups (Lewis-Charp et al., 2003). Sullivan (2000) argues that this component is important for helping marginalized youth see the connections between their personal experiences and those of other groups.

The Research

Youth Action is a community youth organizing program that engages youth in working for change, particularly in their schools. Youth in the program identify issues that directly affect them, and they develop social action campaigns to address these issues. The program is part of a local community development organization located in an ethnically diverse, working-class neighborhood in a large Midwestern city. Most of the 20–25 core members of Youth Action at the time of the study were Latino and African American and came from multiple high schools in that region of the city.

We studied Youth Action for a 4-month period beginning in October 2002. To understand the process of bridging difference, we obtained data from three points of view. First, we carried out 10 biweekly interviews with the lead organizer of Youth Action, Jason Massad, an Arab American in his late 20s, who was a full-time employee of the organization. Second, over this period, members of our research team conducted seven participant observations of program meetings.

Because our primary focus was youth's conscious process of developmental change, our third and main source of data included interviews with youth. With Jason's input, we selected a sample of 10 active members (5 females, 5 males) who were representative of the program in terms of ethnicity, age, and length of participation. Of the 10 participants, 6 were Latino (primarily Mexican American), and 4 were African American; 3 had been in the program for 3 years (ages 18–19), 1 for 2 years (age 17), and 6 for a year or less (ages 15–17). It is worth noting that this was not a sample of exceptional, high-achieving students; most reported that their school grades were in the range of Bs and Cs.

Youth were interviewed every 2 weeks (a total of 64 interviews). The interview protocol surveyed broad domains of development (e.g., motivation, initiative, adult relationships; see Larson et al., 2004) that reflected our larger interest in the processes by which youth grow and change through participation in structured youth programs. Related to the process of bridging difference, the interview protocol contained questions about youth's ongoing relationships within the group; their experiences in the program related to race/ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation; and the changes that they experienced in cross-group

relationships and their thinking about these relationships. Interviewers were encouraged to follow youth's lead in obtaining information about their salient ongoing experiences in the program.

In reporting the findings, we first give a general description of the context that the program provided for youth's experience of intergroup relationships, and then we present our findings on the processes of bridging difference that emerged from the youth's data. To describe the program, we draw on data from all three sources to provide a global picture of the philosophy, activities, and ongoing environment provided by the program. To capture the processes of bridging difference experienced by the youth, we conducted systematic analysis of all pertinent material in the transcripts of the youth interviews, employing grounded theory and related methods of qualitative analyses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Our coding and analysis led to the identification of three components, or stages, of change and several subcomponents within each stage.

Youth Action:
Conditions for Bridging Difference

Jason described the mission of Youth Action as empowering youth: "building the leadership and power of young people to work for community and institutional change." This mission encompasses youth development and community development; it includes helping build the youth's capacities for social action, and it provides support for them to take action to address current injustices that affect their lives. We observed in the meetings that, consistent with this mission of empowerment, Jason ensured that the youth made the decisions about the action campaigns. In the interviews, youth reported that although they had joined Youth Action to fulfill their 40-hour high school service requirement, they stayed on because they became personally invested and engaged in these action campaigns (Pearce & Larson, 2006).

The youth's empowerment was evident in what they achieved over the 4 months. With support from Jason and other staff, youth organized a citywide Youth Summit, lobbied the school board (on unequal school funding, school overcrowding, and its suspension policy), worked to get a career preparation program into the schools, and organized a rally against a new high-stakes exam (Larson & Hansen, 2005). A number of their projects focused on racism and unequal treatment. A report that they presented to the school board, for example, presented findings from the youth's research showing that youth of color were subject to more suspensions and expulsions than White youth were, that fewer were enrolled in college prep classes, and that their schools received less funding than that of schools that were predominantly European American.

The program and these projects provided positive conditions for bridging difference. Jason was invested in creating a comfortable "multiracial space." When asked how he facilitated connections between diverse youth, he listed what were in fact the Allport (1954) contact conditions: "The most important thing is to actually get them working together, building relationships, you know, starting to see how their issues are connected." Some of the projects were done in collaboration with other youth programs, which engaged Youth Action members with a range of diverse youth and adults from across the city. In addition to facilitating these activities and interactions, the adult organizers provided institutional support for bridging difference by counseling and sometimes challenging youth. For example, one youth in our study reported that he became upset and scared when a gay youth came on to him at a workshop that they had attended in another city. But he described having a long conversation with a staff member about his reactions to the experience, and he credited the conversation with helping him think about the situation from the gay youth's perspective.

Beyond culturing empowerment and providing the Allport conditions, the program sought to cultivate critical sociopolitical awareness in the youth. The adults organized periodic workshops and sessions that focused on the injustices experienced by various groups. Their objective was for youth to learn about the experiences of marginalized groups, as well as develop the ability to understand the underlying power relationships and systemic processes behind these experiences. They brought in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) speakers to talk with the youth, and after September 11, Jason brought in members of the Arab community. For the latter speakers, his objective was for youth to see the connections between what various groups experienced:

> What's the impact of immigration policy changes [following September 11] on the Latino community and the Black community? How do attacks on civil liberties and racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims impact African Americans, who don't have immigration issues but have race issues?

Some of the sessions included discussion of current and past social justice movements, such as the civil rights movement, Puerto Rican activism, and the Zapatista movement, which provided models of efforts to redress injustices. Jason repeatedly stressed the importance of critical thinking; his aim was to provide youth with tools of critical analysis to identify the underlying causes of injustice across different groups.

Our analyses of the youth's interviews indicate that these program conditions provide youth an environment in which they can actively change their relations with, understandings of, and behavior toward diverse groups.

The Process of Bridging Difference
Experienced by the Youth

Most of the youth reported that before joining Youth Action, they had had nega-
tive dispositions toward other groups. Donato, a 16-year-old Latino, said, "I used to
be a pretty big jerk to people that were different from me. I would make a bunch of
like horrible racial slurs and stuff like that." Similarly, Mateo, a 16-year-old Latino,
reported having had negative feelings toward gays and lesbians: "Before I got
involved in Youth Action, I was brainwashed by my friends' parents and my friends.
[I used to be] like, 'Oh, fuckin' faggots and like queers' and just like talking shit,
talking mad shit."

These negative dispositions were reinforced by lack of contact with members of
these groups. Jamila, a 16-year-old African American, said, "Before I got here, I
ain't talked to nobody out of my race." Xiamara, an 18-year-old Latina, explained
how similar isolation affected her:

> I grew up in a Latino community. I really didn't think about different ethnic back-
> grounds. But you can't help but [develop] stereotypes, like the racism that you see in
> the community. Like if you were in a car or something and you passed a predominantly
> African American community: "Lock your doors because they're gonna do something."

Even when there were opportunities for interactions, the youth said that they would
avoid other groups. Jamila said, "I use to just blow them off and pay no attention to
them."

In short, the youth reported that their attitudes and behavior before joining Youth
Action had been similar to the normative patterns for U.S. adolescents described by
research. They had held negative stereotypes, had been caught up in in-group/
out-group peer dynamics, and had been exposed to negative messages from adults—
all of which functioned to create social distance and reinforce prejudices toward
other groups.

In the interviews, the youth provided numerous accounts of how they had
changed through their participation in Youth Action. Our coding and analyses of
these accounts suggest three components of the change process. The youth reported
that interaction with groups who were different from their own (Stage 1) led to a
better understanding of these groups (Stage 2), which led to ways of acting that were
informed by greater awareness (Stage 3). We employ the word *stages* in a limited
sense that designates the ongoing change process as suggested by the youth's
descriptions. All three components were reported over the course of the interviews,
yet the youth's accounts suggest that each follows from the other. Youth described
their ongoing interactions as the vehicle for understanding, which in turn provided
the impetus for changes in their behavior.

Stage 1: Interacting and Building Relationships

The first stage in the process of bridging difference involved contact with members of various groups through Youth Action activities. Our coding identified many statements in which youth described interacting and developing relationships with diverse youth, including members of the program and youth met through cross-city collaborations and meetings.

The youth reported interactions with people of diverse racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds and orientations. For example, Donato said,

> You meet a whole bunch of different people. During the summer program, I met a lot of Arab people. I met people with different sexual preferences. I got to meet some socialists, which was kind of weird. I also met some Russians too, [which] was kinda cool.

These were experiences that did not happen elsewhere in their lives. Luis, a 15-year-old Latino, echoed several youth's comments when he said,

> You know how at school they're mostly Black people, or White people, Latino, like that? Right here there's like Arabian, Chinese, I don't know, there is a lot of them, and we go out, we go out to places to eat once in a while. It's like we do lots of things together.

As Luis's quote indicates, these interactions led to the formation of relationships and friendship groups. The youth's work together on action campaigns created camaraderie, shared interests, and personal bonds. The youth reported that over time they came to experience their Youth Action friends as an important peer group in their lives. Most continued to be engaged with friends and peer groups in their schools and neighborhoods, but they described youth in those groups as being more prejudiced and less inclusive. Youth Action, then, provided an alternative peer group, one with social norms that supported relationships across dimensions of difference.

We were struck by how, in describing their initial contacts with diverse groups, few youth mentioned experiencing the anxiety and tension that can occur in cross-group interactions (Pettigrew, 1998). The lack of reported anxiety and the ease with which cross-group interactions led to relationships and friendships appeared to be attributable to Youth Action's success in providing the Allport (1954) contact conditions. The program allowed youth to come together as equals, with support from adults, to work together on social justice campaigns about which they cared strongly. This was captured by Malcolm, a 15-year-old African American, who said that he had "never really come together with so many different races and diversity to act as a family and work together for a certain goal."

Stage 2: Learning and Discovery

The interactions and relationships reported in Stage 1, as well as organized Youth Action sessions, provided venues for understanding diverse groups. Youth described obtaining knowledge of other groups that was more vivid and personal than what they had learned from television, for example, and from studying these groups in school. It was embodied in the lives of people whom they could identify with, people who were like them. Our analyses identified three components of this stage.

Learning about other groups and overcoming stereotypes. First, the youth reported learning about the culture, experiences, and heritage of diverse groups—much of which appeared to occur through everyday conversation. For example, Malcolm described learning about Puerto Rican history through his relationship with a Puerto Rican friend at Youth Action. Similarly, Luis explained, "In the streets you don't really go up to a person and talk. Right here you get the opportunity to actually talk to the person, you know, see what's different about cultures." Through these interactions, the experiences of others became authentic and credible, and stereotypes gave way to nuanced and sympathetic views of these groups.

The youth recounted discovering things about various groups that they found surprising. This was particularly true of their interactions with Arab and Muslim youth. Aisha provided an account of her process of discovery:

> You can learn about a lot from people of different races. Arabians, they wear this thing that's like something different. I thought they wore it just to wear it, but I found out there was like a religious thing to why they wear it around their head. My friend Alima she does this thing—she is Arab—where at certain times of the year she doesn't eat from 7 in the morning till 7 at night. I was just like, "Wow that's different. I can't believe that." I can't go without eating. I am eating every hour on the hour.

What was notable in this and other quotes was how the youth used their own experience as the frame of reference for understanding others. New knowledge of other groups was refracted through their own feelings and subjective reality.

These personalized discoveries led the youth to break through typecast images. Xiamara said, "I always thought that Muslim people couldn't do anything. They couldn't even look up at somebody. I guess all these stereotypes that you have, it isn't like that." Xiamara further discovered that typecasting was a two-way street: "But then you learn about the stereotypes that they have of you and being Catholic, you know, that we're conservative. You just don't know." She seemed to have grasped that other groups formed stereotypes through the same process through which she had stereotyped them. Again, it appeared that her personal experience was the frame of reference for understanding others' experiences. The youth described similar processes of personalized learning with regard to GLBT youth.

Youth's reports, then, suggested that a process of personalization was the most salient catalyst for changing their perceptions of other groups. Through the direct interactions and friendships afforded by Youth Action, they learned about the personal lives of members of other groups, related these experiences to their own, and came to see the fallacies of simplistic stereotypes. This finding is consistent with research indicating that cognitive and emotional empathy reduces stereotypes and prejudice (Batson et al., 1997; Stephan & Finlay, 1999) and that friendship is a powerful vehicle for understanding other groups (Pettigrew, 1998). This personalized process of change was particularly evident in the youth's learning about different groups' unjust treatment.

Learning about injustices experienced by other groups. Part of the mission of Youth Action was to understand community and societal injustice, and the structured sessions and informal interactions exposed youth to information and analysis of the wrongs experienced by various groups.

Youth reported acquiring historical, political, and sociological knowledge through these contacts, with personalization being a key part of the learning process. From workshops, videos, and discussions at Youth Action, members learned about poverty, racism, and discrimination experienced by other groups. Gabriella, a 17-year-old Latina, described how these sessions affected her:

> We talked about Puerto Rican culture and people from the Middle East. They came with home videos and like before September 11, people had all those racist ignorant things to say. It is like after watching that video you just think, "Wow! That changed my whole point of view." You are just provided with all this knowledge; you didn't know things are going on.

Similarly, Jamila said, "I learned about lesbians, gays, queers or whatever, and how they have the most suicide rates, and I learned to see things the way they see, and how to be more sensitive to their needs." Jamila's statement illustrates the process of learning to take the perspective of other groups. In a number of cases, youth related how the injustices experienced by a group had similarities to their own experiences as African Americans and Latinos. For example, Leon, a 17-year-old African American, spoke of the contrast between abstract knowledge obtained from the media and his experiences at Youth Action:

> Since there are a lot of Palestinian people or people of Palestinian descent here, I got a chance to talk to them and find out how they feel about things and how it affected their lives personally. So it's not just an issue on ABC news or something anymore. It's like, "Well, I'm friends with this person, and you know they experienced it."

The youth reported that meeting and getting to know people from other groups who experienced ethnic slurs, discrimination, and unfair treatment helped them to

understand and identify with these experiences. Jason indicated that this process of "connecting youth's lived experiences to issues affecting others" was a deliberate goal of the program. He saw these personal connections as an entry point for youth to develop a deep understanding of the similarities between the experiences of different groups:

> We're trying to proceed in a way where it's not just the Arab youth looking at Arab issues, the Black youth looking at Black issues, and so forth. But they kind of work together to draw the connections between different issues.

Indeed, beyond their personal identification with the unjust treatment received by other groups, the youth's accounts indicate that they were developing a critical understanding of the interpersonal, community, and institutional processes that created such treatment. They spoke of racism, economic disadvantage, and immigration status as causes of inequality and injustice across groups.

Discovering the humanity in others. Given the personalized nature of this learning and discovery, it is not surprising that a frequent theme in the youth's process of change was finding common inner humanity with members of other groups. Donato spoke of his relationships at Youth Action:

> Like here, I chill with more people that listen to hip-hop and are more like urban, and when you really get down to it, they're not that different. It's only like the exterior stuff, but on the inside it's really all the same people.

Youth portrayed this process of connecting to the shared personhood in others as an active process of opening oneself up. Luis reported an active process of transformation in his attitudes toward GLBT peers:

> I changed a lot in a way that, you know, I opened myself up. A lot of people think, "Oh yeah, they're queers," or they started making funny names about them, right? I mean, when you think about it, it's the same person, it's just like different genders, you know. It's the same person inside, because I got a friend, he's really bi and he's cool.

In the language of teenagers, these youth often used the term *cool* to indicate acceptance and to affirm and confer this common humanity.

It is essential to note that as the youth came to identify with this inner similarity, they recognized that differences in religion, ethnicity, and sexuality are important and should not be ignored. For example, Leon said,

> Like as far as civil rights and basic happiness, differences don't matter, no matter what the person's race or social economic background is, that really don't matter, we all should have civil rights. Then, to me, differences do matter when you're dealing with

cultural things, like if you're a Muslim and you can't eat pork and you go out to a restaurant with somebody that's not Muslim and they don't have anything that would accommodate your diet, you know that does matter, because that's like an insult.

Leon's ability to make this differentiation is important because research suggests that the majority of American teens take a categorical position, at least to researchers, that people from different ethnic groups should be treated the same (Hamm, 1998; Killen et al., 2002; Peshkin, 1991). But members of Youth Action, with support from Jason, came to recognize common inner humanity without succumbing to this denial that differences do in fact matter.

To summarize, what was striking to us about the learning and discovery process in Stage 2 was how personalized it was. The process of change at Youth Action was not one of abstract, detached reasoning, as it is often appears to be, from research that attempts to study this change as that separated from actual daily contexts (Karcher & Fisher, 2004; Killen et al., 2002). The youth described an active personal process of change embedded in their experiences at Youth Action: in their personal interactions, in their working with others, and in their developing critical understanding.

Stage 3: Acting With Awareness

In Stage 3, members of Youth Action began to incorporate the insights of Stage 2 into their behavior. These changes reflected a conscious effort to be sensitive to acts of prejudice and to counteract them. We describe, first, the changes that youth recounted in their awareness of prejudicial behavior; then, we describe two types of change in their behavior that involved acting from this greater awareness.

Sensitivity. Youth reported that their experiences at Youth Action made them become attuned to acts of prejudice and how such acts affect people. Xiamara described how she was changed by conversations with people at Youth Action about their experiences of discrimination:

Just talking to them about it, it'll kind of make you sit down and think, "This really does happen." Then, just hearing how they felt, like, "Oh, I felt so humiliated." It makes you think about why they felt that way or how it happened. It just makes you more sensitive. You know that's wrong and shouldn't be done.

Xiamara said that she had not personally experienced discrimination but that learning about her friends' experiences opened her eyes to the fact that such maltreatment takes place, and it sensitized her to it. As in Stage 2, learning opportunities that personalized and humanized the experiences appeared to be most salient in increasing youth's sensitivity.

This greater sensitivity included becoming attuned to their own thought processes and behaviors. Several youth described becoming aware of ways in which they were privileged and had become sensitized to how this privilege affects their perceptions of other groups. For example, Ines, a 19-year-old Latina, reported becoming aware of how biases in the media shaped her perceptions of Palestinians. As part of this greater sensitivity, youth became sensitized to how their behavior might contribute to prejudice. Donato described how he became aware of his attitudes toward gays and lesbians: "I used to think that one harmless joke couldn't hurt 'em." But in talking with GLBT people at Youth Action, he realized, "Man, this is really serious." He became conscious that his attitudes contributed to a society-wide pattern of treatment that had hurtful effects.

Psychological research suggests that prejudicial thinking is so ingrained as to be unconscious and automatic yet that people can develop awareness and undo patterns of thought that reinforce prejudice (Fiske, 2002). Youth Action provides conditions that allow this to occur. The youth reported that Jason, other adults, and other youth challenge them and provide support for them to deconstruct their prejudicial thinking toward other groups.

Changes in behavior toward groups. This greater sensitivity led youth to report changes in how they acted toward other groups. First, they recounted decreases in prejudicial and discriminatory behavior. Donato, who admitted having made "horrible racial slurs" in the past, reported that he now acted in more sensitive ways toward ethnic groups. Mateo provided a in-depth description of how self-examination led to changes in his behavior toward gays and lesbians:

> When I finally got to sit down and talk to 'em, it's like, I learned to be, well, I'm not homophobic anymore. Before I would be like, "Nah, that's just gay." But I see that it's messed up, what I was doing. I didn't mean to do it, you know. I didn't know it hurt 'em that much. But Jason, he's like, "What if somebody would say, 'Ah that that's so Mexican'? That would bother you 'cause that's who you are." So, I'm more conscious about it, like I shouldn't use this word. It could offend people more than what I think it does.

For Mateo and other youth, personal interactions challenged them to curtail prior insensitive behaviors. Mateo's experience of having Jason turn the tables on him—asking him to think how he would feel if treated the way that he treats others—appeared to be instrumental. By placing himself in the other's perspective, Mateo realized how offensive his behavior toward gays and lesbians had been.

At the same time that youth were becoming vigilant about hurtful behavior toward other groups, they reported that the program had made them comfortable, even eager, to interact with these others. For example, Luis described how experiences at Youth Action had opened him to interacting with youth from diverse groups:

> I used to hang around with a whole different crowd, you know. And [now], to tell you the truth, I hang around with different crowds. Like one day, you could see me over here, like with the Rockers, you know how they are gothic. And the next day you see me with ghetto people; I really don't care. Now I really hang around with everybody.

Similarly, Jamila stated, "I talk to different people now, like Arabians, Polish, and this one Asian boy. I just wanted to feel how it was to meet other people outside my race and not just blow them off." As a result of the opportunities at Youth Action, the youth had come to see the difference in other groups no longer as a barrier but as something to learn about. Along with this new perception, they came to see relationships with people from other groups as a valuable asset.

Commitment to social justice and social action. For some youth, the changes in behavior included taking an active role toward advocating for equal treatment and social justice. On a personal level, the youth challenged their peers to think about how their attitudes and behaviors affect others. On a broader level, some developed long-term commitments to work against injustice.

At the personal level, several youth became engaged not only in changing their own insensitive behavior but also in trying to change that of others. They had become aware of the harm that prejudicial remarks can cause, and they became assertive in calling out and challenging the perpetrators. For example, Ines described challenging her ex-boyfriend's frequent use of derogatory names for ethnic groups: "He called his sister's friend a 'chink' one day, and I was like 'Okay. She's not a chink.' You know, they're Chinitos. A 'Chinito' is just 'Chinese' in Spanish."

Similarly, Leon reported that he called out his friends for their prejudice treatment toward sexual minority youth:

> My friends, if they found out someone was gay, they would be quick to harass them. They'd be like "Oh he's gay, he's a fag, or whatever." And I'd just be like, "Man that ain't even necessary, don't be trippin' like that. You know that's just how he is, so don't bother him." Some of them would be like "Man, why are you stickin' up for them? You gay or something?" and I'd be like "No, just check my phonebook. But, I know some people who are gay or lesbian, but they're still decent people." I don't expect them to be all changed or whatever, but I feel like I am doing something.

Even when his friends questioned his motives, Leon stood firm in the hope that doing so might have a later impact on them. Leon also explained that Youth Action had made him knowledgeable about other cultures so that when a peer said something stereotyped about a group, he would respond: "I'm more quick to say, 'I know somebody that's that [group] and they don't do that.'"

In addition to describing how they called people out, the youth reported being proactive in trying to help peers understand the injustices experienced by different groups. Mateo said that he was speaking up more—that his experience at Youth

Action had "turned [him] a little bit into like a preacher type guy." He and others described drawing on his new knowledge to talk to peers about the political and economic causes of problems in their schools. Also, as part of the Youth Summit, the youth organized a session aimed at raising participants' sensitivity to antigay behavior, and they created a role-play game aimed at getting other youth to understand the many channels through which students in underfunded schools are disadvantaged.

On the broader level, a number of youth reported having developed a long-term commitment to working for social justice. Xiamara described how the program had opened her to the injustices experienced by different groups and how she now wanted to become a community activist to fight discrimination. Two other youth, Leon and Ines, wanted to become lawyers and defend people's rights. Leon said that he wanted to "help people feel like they're being listened to," as well as educate and organize them.

This commitment to fighting injustice is similar to the final stage in Cross's nigrescence model of identity development (1995), in which African Americans were found to translate their achieved sense of Blackness into sustained commitment to working for change. At Youth Action, it was not investment in a specific ethnic identity that appeared to mobilize this commitment but rather an identification with the injustices that occurred across marginalized groups. Our data suggest that the program allows youth to see the connections between their personal experiences and the factors affecting diverse people. The commitments that they formulate, then, are oriented toward fighting the causes of injustice and divisiveness across groups.

Conclusions:
How Settings Facilitate Bridging Difference

We began this article with a developmental paradox: At the same time that youth are gaining potential to understand difference, many become involved in fewer cross-group relationships, and their rates of prejudicial behavior increase. For the majority of youth, new abilities for sophisticated thinking about difference appear to be trumped by their experience and investment as members of peer groups, families, and neighborhoods.

Youth Action provides a valuable case study in that its youth engage in a change process that "countertrumps" this normative age trend. The Latino and African American youth in the program described a three-stage process of bridging difference that includes forming cross-group relationships, developing understanding of diverse groups, and coming to act with awareness in relation to these groups. This change process is clearly one in which the youth are active agents of self-change. Their numerous descriptions present this process as something they do for themselves, not something done to them. Yet, the program serves as a facilitative environment that provides conditions for youth to become empowered to change. In this

section, we conclude by discussing the factors in the environment at Youth Action that we believe account for its effectiveness in supporting this change process, those that we think can be instructive for other youth programs.

Youth Action appears to be effective, first, because it is highly successful in creating the Allport contact conditions. It provides a community space that is separated from the peer alliances of schools, a space where diverse youth can come into contact afresh, on equal footing. Youth Action also engages its members on a shared cause that they connect with: fighting injustice in their schools. As a result, youth become highly motivated to work collaboratively, building trust and friendships. Furthermore, the program provides strong institutional support for bridging difference: The adults create structured opportunities for youth to interact with and learn about diverse groups; they also provide one-to-one support for youth's experience of the change process.

These contact conditions facilitate the positive cross-group interactions and development of relationships that we describe as Stage 1. The relationships, in turn, come to form an alternative peer group to the groups that youth are part of in school, one that is deliberately resistant to the divisive cognitive and in-group/out-group dynamics of many teen peer groups. This alternative peer group then positions the youth for the learning, discovery, and behavior changes in Stages 2 and 3. But the contact conditions alone are not enough.

The second factor, which follows in part from the contact conditions, is that Youth Action supports personalized change processes. Jason, the lead organizer, is deliberate in creating structured sessions and informal opportunities for youth to have personal interactions with members of diverse groups. He also works to find points of connection between the members' experiences as urban Latino and African American youth and the experiences of Arab, GLBT, and other marginalized groups. These conditions set the stage for youth to engage in what appear to be a powerful subjective encounter with the other. At one level, personal interaction allows youth to see members of these groups as authentic and credible unique individuals (Stephan & Stephan, 1995). More deeply, these conditions allow youth to employ their new adolescent capabilities to put themselves into the perspectives of others and identify with their thoughts and feelings—for example, to imagine being a youth in a wealthy suburban family or to feel the humiliation in response to post–September 11 acts of discrimination against Arab Americans. Quintana (1998) observed that the adolescents whom he interviewed conceived of ethnicity less as an objective status than as a state of subjectivity. The youth here appeared to be active in imagining and empathizing with others' subjectivity and connecting their hurts and humanity with their own. Anthropologist Ronato Rosaldo (1989) has argued that deep understanding of other groups can depend on finding commonalities in emotional experience. These youth described this type of emotional connection in transposing, for example, the experiences of a gay youth to one's own experiences as a Mexican American.

Personalized interaction appeared to be powerful at Stage 2 in breaking through stereotypes of groups, in coming to understand the injustices against them, and in connecting with their humanity. The youth described it as being central to the process in Stage 3 of understanding the effects of their own prejudice behavior on others and becoming committed to working for social change. We suspect that the personal identification that the youth developed with other groups' unjust treatment was a significant factor in motivating these transformations.

The third important factor to facilitating change, one rarely mentioned in the literature on facilitating intergroup relationships, was Youth Action's promotion of the youth's critical analysis of the underlying processes that create injustices across groups. Numerous authors have argued that understanding the interpersonal and systemic causes of injustice is essential to growth and development, particularly for members of marginalized groups (Freire, 1972; Ginwright & James, 2002; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). Research suggests that the life stage of adolescence brings youth the cognitive potential to understand these systemic causes (Karchar & Fischer, 2004; Quintana, 1994), although this potential is often unrealized. The environment provided by Youth Action helps youth develop this understanding. Through their action campaigns, discussions with guest speakers, encouragement from the adult leaders, and discussions among themselves, the youth began to understand the mechanisms of prejudice, racism, and economic inequality that lie behind the experiences of different groups.

This critical understanding, we believe, provides a framework for youth to identify with other groups. It helps them make the personalized connections that motivate change. At Stage 2, this critical awareness appears to facilitate youth's ability to understand the experiences of groups other than their own. They become able to see that some of the same factors that they are subject to as Latinos and African Americans affect other oppressed groups. At Stage 3, this critical understanding motivates and helps youth examine and change their own behavior. They reported coming to understand, for example, that what they once saw as a harmless joke about gays and lesbians contributes to a systemic pattern of discrimination. Critical understanding of the mechanisms of prejudice and oppression also led them to call out prejudice behavior in their peers and, for some, to make a long-term commitment to counteracting these mechanisms. The combination of personalization and critical awareness, then, appeared to provide both the motivation and the conceptual bridge for bridging difference.

Implications for Youth Programs

The example of Youth Action suggests that community youth programs can be effective in counteracting normative adolescent trends and supporting the process of bridging difference. Youth programs—particularly, youth organizing programs—may be better able than schools to provide the Allport (1954) contact conditions,

facilitate personalized experiences with difference, and promote critical awareness of interpersonal and systemic processes that create inequality. Youth Action's mission of fighting injustice fosters critical awareness that appears to be especially significant in providing the motivational and conceptual bases for bridging difference. Youth rally among one another and, in essence, for each other in their pursuit for social equity and justice (Pearce & Larson, 2006). Through the program's ongoing education around racism and homophobia and through the actual work of activism, youth come to discover how, despite their unique histories and identities, they are united in their experience of and fight against social oppression. There are challenges, however, that should be recognized in applying the findings seen here to other youth programs.

First, many youth programs have homogeneous memberships (Schofield, 1995) and thus provide limited opportunities for intergroup interactions. Youth Action illustrates that this limitation can be addressed, at least partly, through bringing in speakers and through collaboration with youth programs that have different membership demographics. A second, more difficult challenge lies in generalizing the process found here to programs and collaborations that include European American youth, a group that because of its privileged position, is often resistant to acknowledging difference and structural sources of inequality (Perry, 2001). At Youth Action, the shared experience of resisting oppressive forces provides youth with a cross-cutting identity that appeared to facilitate their ability to connect and to be in solidarity with each other. It is likely to be more challenging to find a similar rallying point for groups of youth that have a history of vertical, unequal relationships.

A third challenge to bridging difference involves the reluctance of some programs to confront the underlying causes of prejudice. In other youth programs we have studied, this was manifest in a color-blind ideology (e.g., "We're all the same" or, in a religious youth program we studied, "We're all God's children") and in other American ideologies (e.g., "If you work hard, you will be successful in life"). This neutrality creates what Tatum (1997) has called a *culture of silence*, which leaves differences that matter unacknowledged and can allow intergroup tensions to grow (Fine et al., 1997). The effectiveness of Youth Action in facilitating bridging difference illustrates the importance of providing youth with critical tools to analyze, understand, and talk about real differences between groups and what creates them.

We caution that attempts to translate the findings reported here to other contexts should take into account their inherent limits. This report is a case study aimed at understanding the complexity of what transpired in one youth program. Yet, past experience demonstrates that patterns of behavior and change can markedly differ from one setting to another, including between settings that appear to provide similar conditions. The methodological limits of the findings should also be recognized. Although we view the use of youth's accounts as a strength of the study, we recognize that data from verbal reports can be influenced by memory bias, positive self-report bias, and underrepresentation of experiences from less responsive and

articulate youth. Furthermore, the qualitative methods employed in this study are tools for generating theory—for example, we have neither tested nor proven a set of relationships between what the program provided and how youth changed. With these cautions in mind, however, we think that the study provides a useful exemplar of how community programs can facilitate youth's active engagement in a process of changing their thinking and behavior about difference, a process that needs to happen much more often for communities to function effectively in the future.

Note

1. The name of the program and its participants are pseudonyms.

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