

How Staff of Youth Programs Respond to Culture-Related Incidents: Nonengagement Versus Going “Full-Right-In”

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Abstract

Incidents in which program leaders confront issues of culture and race occur regularly in many youth programs. These incidents are important because they reflect powerful dimensions of youth’s lived experience and bring issues of injustice and program inclusiveness to the fore. This study examined these culture-related incidents and how leaders responded to them. Interviews were conducted with 50 leaders from 27 programs serving primarily Latino, African American, and European youth. Half the programs served middle school–aged teens and half high school–aged teens. Qualitative analyses identified four categories of incidents, each presenting distinct considerations for leaders. Two (*offensive remarks* and *discrimination*) involved inappropriate speech and unjust actions. Two (*discomfort with intercultural contact* and *cultural identification and identity*) involved youth’s expression of negative attitudes toward others’ or own group. Leaders differed in their responses

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to incidents. A universalist, race-blind group asserted that culture did not matter in their program and reported virtually no incidents. A second group reported culture-related incidents but described limited responses because they lacked confidence or skills. A third group appeared to represent best practices: These leaders engaged directly with the incidents and facilitated reflective dialogue in which youth drew on experiences, analyzed situations, and learned through collective discussion. Implications for practice are drawn.

Keywords

youth practice, youth development, culture, race/ethnicity, youth programs, afterschool programs

Adina Kautzman,¹ the adult leader of an urban agricultural program with all African American middle school students, recounted a challenging incident involving two participants: “Yesterday, we were opening up the fire hydrant to water the plants, and we’ve been doing this for four years. But a police officer came by and put Aliyah (a Summer Intern) and a student in the back of the car.” The program had permission from the alderman to use the fire hydrant. Adina believed this was racial profiling, “Like if someone on the East Side [an affluent White area] was opening the fire hydrant to water a community garden, would they have stopped and forced them into the car?”

Challenging incidents like this, where program leaders confront issues of race and culture, are common in many programs with youth of color. These culture-related incidents are important because they bring critical issues of culture, cultural identity, and program inclusiveness to the fore (Quiroz-Martínez, HoSang, & Villarosa, 2004; Ross, Capra, Carpenter, Hubbell, & Walker, 2016). Under the heading of “culture-related incidents,” we include situations involving race, ethnicity, immigration, religion, and language, in which adult program leaders encounter conflict, discomfort, or potential developmental harm for youth. These go beyond direct encounters with discrimination, like Adina’s, and include microaggressions within the program, as well as youth’s expressions of internalized attitudes, stereotypes, and self-questioning stemming from their experiences of marginalization. Part of the reason these incidents are important is that—in a society permeated with inequality and prejudice—they reflect powerful dimensions of youth’s lived realities: youth’s ongoing experiences of personal threat and danger, marginalization, and trauma. Minority and immigrant youth may readily experience

culture-related incidents through the lens of these wider daily realities (Coates, 2015; Weinstein & Obear, 1992). It is imperative that the field of youth development give attention to understanding the varied and powerful issues these incidents present to program leaders.

It is equally important that the field examine and discuss how program leaders can respond to these incidents in ways that promote cultural inclusiveness and positive youth development. Leaders have relationships with youth as mentors, role models, and adult friends, which can make their responses especially influential (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). Adina's reaction to her situation illustrates some of the challenges that leaders can face:

Adina persuaded the officers to release the two young people. Later, she overheard youth sharing experiences of police profiling and noticed they were disturbed by what happened. Although she had goals of "contradicting the racist structure" and showing youth "an example of a White person who doesn't think they're criminals," she questioned whether she could discuss the incident with them: "I'm from such a different background, I don't feel like I'm the right person to have this conversation—who am I to be giving this conversation?"

Although Adina recognized a need, she felt anxious and unprepared to respond. Research in educational contexts, however, suggests that not responding in a situation like this can negatively affect youth's feeling of safety and belonging; and it can reinforce the normalization of racial and cultural inequalities (Pica-Smith, 2009; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). It is important to understand the skills and strategies leaders need to respond confidently and constructively to these incidents.

In this study, we sought to conduct "use inspired" research aimed at generating findings that inform youth practice (Trochim, Kane, Graham, & Pincus, 2011; Tseng, 2012). We chose to study programs for adolescents because they are at an age of becoming more aware of, invested in, and sensitive to issues of cultural identity and discrimination (Quintana, 1998). Our first objective was to examine the culture-related incidents reported by leaders of programs for middle school-aged (MS) youth and high school-aged (HS) youth. The goal was to identify the range of such incidents and the underlying issues they present to leaders. In-depth examination of the complexities of the dilemmas encountered in daily practice is recognized as a vital step to improving youth practice (Larson, Walker, Rusk, & Diaz, 2015; Ross et al., 2016). Our second objective was to examine leaders' responses to these incidents. A first goal was to see the variety of approaches leaders took and the thinking that informed their approaches. A second goal was to

describe what constructive responses look like, drawing on findings from research in educational and other social service contexts that suggest preliminary criteria for culturally responsive practice. The findings of our study show how a subset of leaders used a culturally responsive approach that involved mobilizing the capabilities of youth to learn from culture-related incidents.

Literature Review

Culturally Inclusive Programs

Creating culturally inclusive programs is a widely endorsed standard in the field of youth development. A panel of the National Research Council emphasized that youth programs should ensure that *all* participants experience physical and psychological safety, support for efficacy, and “meaningful inclusion,” along with other features of high-quality developmental settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The panel further suggested that “any program that is not sensitive to participants’ culture is not likely to succeed” (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 114). A similar standard of cultural inclusiveness has been articulated in the fields of education (National Council of Teachers of English, n.d.), psychotherapy (Sue, Zane, Nagayama Hall, & Berger, 2009), and health science (Kumagai & Lyson, 2009). To create inclusive educational environments, many have argued, staff must be attentive to the differences in power related to culture and race that young people might experience (Kirshner, 2015). Power differentials in program settings can be created through cultural insensitivity, stereotyping, prejudice, and expectations that staff and youth bring to the program (Outley & Witt, 2006).

Culture-Related Incidents

Research on culture-related incidents in classrooms has found that they are often complex, emotionally charged, and challenging for both students and educators (Weinstein & Obeir, 1992). Although these incidents have not been systematically studied in youth programs, they have been identified as an important topic by research on the wider array of “dilemmas of practice” that program staff encounter in their work (Banks, 2010; Larson et al., 2015). As has been found with other dilemmas of practice in programs, preliminary evidence suggests that culture-related incidents involve diverse, multilayered, and sometimes competing considerations (Quiroz-Martínez et al., 2004; Ross et al., 2016). Outley and Witt (2006) identified considerations that might be relevant to culture-related incidents in programs, including youth’s

language, immigrant status, degree of acculturation, religious beliefs, culture-based behaviors and values, and ethnic identity.

To understand how these different considerations enter into incidents, it is necessary to understand the lived realities youth bring to the program each day. These realities provide frames of reference for youth's interpretations of program experiences (Ginwright, 2010). In their school lives, for example, youth of color often experience overt hostility and low expectations from teachers, suspensions, and disregard for their cultural values and assets (Cohen & Steele, 2002; Hope, Skoog, & Jagers, 2015). Youth living in low-income communities encounter frequent violence, police harassment, and ongoing stress associated with poverty and family disruption (Ginwright, 2010; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Immigrant youth encounter additional challenges, including xenophobia, threats of deportation, and distinct forms of family stress (Suárez-Orozco, Abo-Zena, & Marks, 2015). These experiences can contribute to youth's feelings of vulnerability, suspicion of authority figures, and heightened sensitivity to inequality in the program (Outley & Witt, 2006; Spencer et al., 2006). And this vulnerability and sensitivity may be brought to the fore in culture-related incidents.

Examining the range of culture-related incidents and the considerations they present for leaders was our first research objective. In line with other research on dilemmas of practice in youth programs, our goal was to shed light on the diverse and nuanced complexities of these incidents. We also recognized that examples representing the diverse range of incidents can be useful for staff training (Larson et al., 2015; Ross et al., 2016).

Leaders' Responses to Culture-Related Incidents

Research conducted primarily in schools finds that educators differ greatly in how responsive they are to issues of culture and race (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Outley & Witt, 2006). Some are resentful or hostile toward youth of color and actively suppress discussion of racial inequalities and injustice; these educators may be most likely to perpetrate microaggressions against youth of color (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Suárez-Orozco, Casanova, et al., 2015). Another set of educators is not emotionally invested, may passively follow institutional guidelines, or lacks skills to engage with issues of culture and inequality. A third "culturally responsive" set of educators is aware, emotionally invested, and actively engages youth in discussion of cultural issues (Gay, 2010).

Findings from this third set of educators suggest that the most constructive responses to culture-related incidents are aimed at a set of interrelated goals: directly addressing the incident, creating and sustaining an inclusive

environment, and helping youth develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills. These and additional findings also suggest that responses are most effective in achieving these goals when they included two core elements: *active engagement* and *cultivating reflective dialogue*.

Decades of research shows that to create inclusiveness, the staff of multi-ethnic institutions need to be actively engaged in multiple ways. These include intervening to stop acts of prejudice, articulating and modeling principles of inclusiveness, legitimizing discussion of race and culture, validating young people's feelings, and moderating conflicts that arise between groups (National Research Council [NRC], 2000; Pettigrew, 1998). Failure to act has consequences for young people. When college instructors do not respond to culture-related incidents, the effects on students include silence, misunderstanding and hostility, polarization of differences, and heightening of unequal statuses (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009). Even fifth-grade children perceived that a teacher's nonresponse to culture-related incidents represented endorsement of inequality (Pica-Smith, 2009).

The second core element, cultivating reflective dialogue, is aimed at helping young people take ownership of creating an inclusive environment and develop capacities for critical thinking about culture, race, and power. Studies in classrooms show that reflective group discussion is effective because it can empower students to engage in processes of unpacking unstated assumptions, examining emotional responses, and learning from each other (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Sue, 2013; Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Weinstein & Obear, 1992). Research on restorative justice programs in schools also demonstrates the effectiveness of addressing culture-related and other issues by empowering young people through reflective dialogue (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2015). Additional findings came from a study of 16 youth programs in which racial equity was a major programmatic focus. Although not specifically focused on culture-related incidents, the study found that the programs' effectiveness in raising youth's consciousness about race and culture was due in part to their engaging youth in critical group examination of the causes of inequality and structures of power, and "provid[ing] opportunities for youth to process deep and painful emotions regarding racism" (Quiroz-Martínez et al., 2004, p. 7). Kirshner (2015) observed that dialogues about race and culture are effective because they allow youth to critique and "denaturalize" cultural inequalities and mistreatment. Little is known, however, about practices within youth programs that are not principally focused on racial justice.

Building on this work, our second research objective was to examine how a sample of experienced youth program leaders responded to culture-related incidents and whether and how leaders used these two core elements. We

were also interested in how these core elements might have been differently adapted in programs for younger and older adolescents.

This Study

Our approach to addressing these two research objectives was to interview program leaders about their experiences of and responses to culture-related incidents. We recognized that this approach could lead to underreporting: Leaders who are not culturally responsive may be less able or willing to report on incidents. But, for this preliminary study, our approach was suited to our aim of understanding incidents from leaders' vantage points—as practitioners experiencing and assessing incidents and then formulating goals and implementing strategies in response.

Method

Programs and Participants

Data came from interviews with the 50 primary program leaders in 27 programs. These programs were part of a larger study, the Pathways Project/Proyecto Caminos, aimed at understanding developmental processes and staff practices in high-quality programs. Because of that aim, we selected programs that had experienced leaders and other features associated with high quality, for example, low drop-out rates, leaders described youth development as a priority. The programs were selected from three geographic areas (two urban, one rural and small city). The sampling objectives were to select programs that served low-income and low-middle-income youth and to obtain equal numbers of programs from each geographic area that served either primarily Latino or non-Latino youth. Youth in 17 programs were ethnically homogeneous (nine Latino, four Black, four White) and 10 were of mixed ethnicity. Most of the mixed-ethnicity programs were primarily Latino and African American. The sample was also selected to include approximately equal numbers of programs that served HS youth ($n = 13$) and MS youth ($n = 14$). Programs serving the two age groups were selected to be matched in geographic location, youth ethnic backgrounds, program content, and other features.

Although cultural content was not a criterion for program selection, the majority of programs had some planned content. Leaders in 17 of the 27 programs reported having at least one activity or project that related to the cultures or backgrounds of the youth. Most of these activities centered on cultural food, holidays, and dances; six programs (five of them HS programs) had planned

activities in which youth examined issues of ethnic identity or social justice. None of the programs were primarily focused on culture or social justice.

The 50 leaders had extensive experience working with youth ($M = 12.6$ years, range = 2-42). Thirty (60%) were paid full-time staff (14 part-time, six unpaid); 37 (74%) had a college degree or higher education. Twenty-seven were White and 23 were leaders of color (eight Latino, six Black/African American, and nine multiethnic leaders). Thirty-one leaders were female and 19 were male. Their average age was 34.9 years (range = 22-62). HS and MS leaders did not differ significantly in rate of college completion or number of years working with youth. MS leaders were younger than HS leaders ($M = 32.0$ vs. 37.8 years), but the difference was not significant.

Procedures and Interview Protocol

Leaders were interviewed at four time points over a full program cycle (in most cases, a school year). Interviews were individually administered by trained interviewers who had extensive experience working with diverse populations. Interviewers were graduate students, staff, and faculty members from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim; transcriptions were checked by the interviewer.

The interview protocols contained structured sets of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed accounts of leaders' experiences and practices in their work. Data for the current analyses came from question sets asked during the second and fourth interviews. At Times 2 and 4, leaders were asked to discuss a dilemma or challenging situation they faced recently with youth and how they responded. In some cases, these involved culture or race. At Time 4, leaders were also asked a set of questions about cultural issues. Our prior experience suggested that questions about race and culture can create discomfort for leaders. To help them feel comfortable with the Time 4 questions, we first had them describe their own cultural backgrounds, using a broad definition of culture (e.g., ethnicity, race, religion, language, income, education). Then we asked questions about how their background influenced their relationships with the youth and asked for descriptions of their conversations with youth about culture. Interviewers were encouraged to obtain specific examples of interactions with youth whenever possible.

Analyses

Examining the range of incidents and underlying concerns. Data analyses for the first objective followed an inductive approach to identify emergent patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and utilized a consensus approach to

make judgments about the meaning of specific passages (Hill et al., 2005). Coding was also informed by previous literature, which provided sensitizing concepts that aided in the interpretive process. Analyses for the first objective involved three stages.

Identifying culture-related incidents. Three coders read the pertinent interview segments and identified incidents that had cultural elements. They followed an iterative process of coding independently, comparing and discussing codes, developing and refining operational definitions, consulting relevant literature, and checking in with all coauthors. Based on several iterations of coding, the team defined culture-related incidents as those that met four criteria: (a) involved youth in the program; (b) focused on issues of race, ethnicity, immigration, religion, or language; (c) involved conflict, tension, stigmatization, discomfort, or injustice; and (d) leaders or youth expressed concerns. We were stringent in excluding occasions when evidence for any criterion was weak (e.g., a leader speculating that her being White influenced youth's actions toward her).

Applying these criteria, 72 culture-related incidents were identified. These came from 28 leaders, with the number of incidents per leader ranging from one to nine. There were no significant differences ($p < .05$) between the 28 leaders who provide incidents and the other 22, based on leaders' individual characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, birthplace), years working with youth, education, or programs characteristics (age of youth, ethnic composition).

Categorizing incidents. Next, we coded these 72 incidents with the goal of identifying types of situations. This coding used constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), asking how the incidents were similar to, and different from, each other in the type of conflict, tension or injustice; who was affected; and what concerns leaders identified. Following the same iterative process used for the prior stage, the team identified four main categories of culture-related incidents: *offensive remarks*, *discrimination*, *discomfort with intercultural contact*, and *cultural identification and identity*. Two of the 72 incidents were placed in an "other" category. (Both involved youth's stance on a cultural issue. In one, a youth refused to go on a fieldtrip to a historical fort that was the site of racial atrocities; in another, a Latino youth confronted a teacher for appropriating the Black Power sign.)

Describing the range and common concerns within each category. In the final step, we conducted constant comparison *within* the categories with the objective of providing a descriptive picture of the salient features within each. This included, first, looking at who was involved in the incidents, when and

where they occurred, and identifying key phrases and examples that illustrate the variety. Second, we conducted an interpretive theoretical analysis of the salient leader considerations across all incidents in the category, drawing on literature in some cases to put the considerations of the leaders into the context of pertinent research findings.

Examining leaders' responses to incidents. Analyses to address the second objective used similar iterative processes of consensual coding, with an added component of assessing whether and how leaders used the two effective practices found in other institutional contexts.

Identifying pertinent data. First, we identified all interview passages that were pertinent to leaders' responses to culture-related incidents. These included passages in which the leader described goals or philosophy that influenced how they responded or would respond to culture-related incidents. Many leaders described a philosophy that transcended specific incidents; in some cases, it explained why a leader would *not* respond. This set also included passages describing responses by 27 leaders to 57 incidents. (These 27 included all but one of the 28 leaders who reported at least one incident.) In all, 33 leaders had pertinent data: 27 leaders with a response to one or more incidents and six leaders who had a stated philosophy but no response. (Four of the remaining 17 leaders had left the program before the Time 4 interview; the others gave short answers to the questions about culture, which did not yield codable data about responses to incidents.) We discovered that for many leaders, their philosophy appeared to drive how they responded to incidents, so we decided the data could be represented most parsimoniously by using the leader (rather than the incident) as the unit of coding for this second objective.

Coding and analysis. We examined these 33 leaders' responses to the culture-related incidents and their statements on goals and philosophy vis-à-vis culture. We again went through an iterative process of coding, creating operational definitions, and recoding. But in this case, the development of codes was partly informed by how leaders' responses and philosophy corresponded to what existing knowledge suggests is effective. (The decision to draw on this literature to inform our coding categories was made midway through the iterative coding process, and required several iterations to implement in a way adapted both to the literature and leaders' accounts.) Three categories of leaders were identified as described in the "Results" section.

Subsequent steps of analysis were aimed at identifying how leaders in each category thought about incidents, the goals shaping their responses, and their specific responses. In a final step, we conducted integrative theoretical

analyses of the findings (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) and these informed the “Discussion” section.

Results

Culture-Related Incidents

The first two categories of incidents dealt with situations that leaders or youth perceived as offensive or unjust. The second two dealt with youth’s expressions of thoughts and feelings that suggested they felt either tensions toward other cultural groups or marginalized by them.

Offensive remarks. These 26 incidents involved youth making comments or using language that leaders or other youth perceived as offensive or hurtful (although the speakers may not have intended it that way). Most occurred during program activities or in conversations among youth. Twelve incidents were identified by leaders of programs for HS youth and 14 by leaders of MS youth. Offensive remarks included ethnic slurs, racist comments, derogatory jokes, degrading stereotypes, and verbal bullying.

Leaders’ concerns with these incidents included their negative effects on the targeted youth. They recognized that racial bullying—and even comments intended as jokes—can have negative impacts. One leader, Danielle Gibson, described “a girl that’s having a hard time because she’s getting criticized [by other youth] for having such a strong accent, because she recently immigrated.” Danielle was concerned the criticism was isolating the young woman and increasing her difficulty adjusting to a new country. Research shows that being the target of deprecating ethnic comments and stereotypes can have cumulative negative effects on self-efficacy and mental health (Hyunh, 2012).

Leaders also worried that offensive remarks could create a hostile climate, conflicting with their goals of making programs a welcoming, inclusive space for all youth. Closely related, offensive remarks could escalate into conflict between youth from different ethnic groups.

Another consideration in these incidents was that the offensiveness of a remark was sometimes contested. Four leaders reported incidents involving youth’s use of the N-word. All four felt the word contributed to a hostile climate, but youth did not always agree. Youth in an arts program were using the word within a hip-hop context. But Desiree Bustamante said, “it became really evident that [some] people were getting bothered by that.”

Discrimination. The 13 incidents involving discrimination were situations in which an adult with authority acted unfairly or unjustly toward youth of

color. Nearly all involved HS youth, and the unfair treatment was by teachers, police, community members, and, in two examples, program leaders. They included instances of African American youth being profiled by police (including Adina's account of a police officer forcing two members into a police car), a youth being told by her teacher she was not smart enough to take advanced classes because she was Latina, and a hate crime involving a youth's immigrant mother having flour thrown in her face. In most cases, the discrimination occurred outside the program and came up in youth's conversations with the leader, but some incidents occurred during a program activity in the community. For example, Desiree Bustamante accompanied African American and Latino youth on a fieldtrip to a downtown art store during its promotion of "Youth Artist Month." As soon as the group walked in, they were followed and harassed by store staff, like they expected the youth "are going to steal something."

Leaders were concerned with the injustice of these incidents and the powerlessness of the youth (and themselves) in the face of prejudiced misuse of authority. One leader expressed anguish at how the low expectation and prejudice of teachers led to youth of color being "demoted out of" educational opportunities, an effect documented by research (Pulido, 2009). Leaders were distressed that youth appeared to experience these incidents as normal: that they *expected* to be treated unfairly. One leader quoted a youth as saying, "It happens. It is what it is." Youth's experience of powerlessness in response to racism can impact their self-concepts, as well as their physical and mental health (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2010). In most instances, these leaders were not positioned to change the behavior of the prejudiced adult. But as educators, they wanted youth to learn how to respond in healthy ways to these situations—in the words of one leader, to "defend themselves" from internalizing discrimination and racism.

Discomfort with intercultural contact. This category included 13 incidents when youth made comments or acted in ways indicating discomfort interacting with people from cultural backgrounds different from their own (in two instances, the discomfort was with a White program leader). In some cases, leaders reported that youth demonstrated anxiety, appeared intimidated by, or felt out of place with people from other backgrounds. Bill Lyons described an incident when he took the Latino youth in his program to a conference in another city: "And so, we get over there and the room is full of all African American people, except us. So my group, which is usually really confident and joking and cocky, all of a sudden became very timid." In other cases, youth mentioned they did not like, hated, or thought "those people . . . odd and weird." Andres Rivas, coleader of a program that served MS Latino

youth, described a trip to Chinatown during which several youth told him they did not like Chinese people. He asked why, and they responded, "I don't know, I just don't like them." Andres explained, "They don't even know Chinese people; they just assumed that they didn't like them."

Leaders attributed youth's discomfort to having had limited or negative interactions with the particular racial or ethnic group. Limited contact, they explained, led youth to make judgments based on "their families' stereotypes" or media images that provided a typecast or incomplete picture of the group. Andres said their youth lived in an urban community that is all Latino, and they rarely entered other neighborhoods; "It's just they're not used to seeing [other groups] or it's just something they'll see on TV and no real actual exposure to them." Several leaders attributed youth's discomfort and hostility to negative experiences in nearby communities where prejudice against immigrants and people of color was normative.

Leaders' major concern with these incidents was the effect that youth's discomfort with other groups could have on their futures. If youth did not develop skills to interact with groups other than their own, it could limit their access to educational opportunities and jobs. Erin Murphy was concerned that isolation would hurt their Latino youth:

Fear is going to paralyze them and make them come back here [to El Centro]. I really do feel like they will run into those barriers, because it's in their mind and what they expect. So it's like this self-fulfilling prophecy.

Indeed, research shows that the social isolation of minority youth in neighborhoods that are both low income and ethnically segregated hurts their life chances (Wilson, 2012).

Cultural identification and identity. While the prior category involved feelings toward other cultural groups, the 18 incidents in this category centered on youth's feelings toward their *own* group. This category included youth's expressing negative attitudes toward their racial or cultural group, or some element of it. These incidents were more frequent among younger youth ($n = 12$). Youth were described by leaders as wanting to disassociate themselves from a stereotyped image of their group. Examples included an African American youth not wanting to "sound ghetto," immigrant youth "looking down on themselves" because of their undocumented status, and Latino youth not feeling comfortable using their indigenous name.

In one incident, Bella Jensen told of an African American youth who appeared to be uncertain about his race and ethnicity: "One day he'll call himself [N-word] and the next day he says he's White. And so he's definitely

struggling with where he fits in. He went around and asked everybody what their race is.” Daniel Alvarez reported youth distancing themselves from their Latino background: “I’ve heard some of them say, ‘Oh, those Mexicans,’ and I’m like, ‘Have you looked at yourself in the mirror?’ They say, ‘No, I’m not Mexican. I’m American.’”

Some of these incidents may reflect normative identity exploration and fluctuations associated with ethnic identity development during adolescence (e.g., Kiang, Witkow, Baldelomar, & Fuligni, 2010). However, leaders were concerned that youth were internalizing negative societal images of their cultural group and possibly rejecting their cultural background. Daniel (who had a master’s degree in sociology) said, “They’re oppressing themselves. They’re negating their roots, their history, or their heritage. And they’re feeding into the lies people tell them about the group.” Research shows that some young people from nondominant groups internalize the negative images, prejudice, and structural racism of the dominant group (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Part of leaders’ concern was that youth did not appear to recognize the rich cultural heritage, strengths, and enormous diversity within their group—a heritage that afforded them many ways of constructing their cultural identification. Leaders not only understood the challenges youth were struggling with but also believed that developing a positive cultural identity can be an asset for youth and help protect them from the negative effects of racism. Daniel said,

It can be really hard, and you have to be able to defend yourself. The best way to defend yourself is for you to be really centered on what your culture is, and where you come from. And how far back that goes.

Consistent with this, research indicates that positive ethnic identity is linked to multiple positive outcomes among adolescents of color, including self-esteem, self-mastery, and general well-being (Smith & Silva, 2011).

Leaders’ Responses to Cultural Incidents

The next question was how leaders responded to these incidents. Our analysis identified three categories of leaders, with distinct philosophies and approaches guiding their responses.

Universalist philosophy: Race-blind approach. The seven leaders in this category stated a position that culture and race were not important to their program. These leaders described beliefs consistent with what has been called a

“universalistic philosophy” (Imam & Bowler, 2010) or a “color-blind racial ideology” (Neville, Awad, Brooks, Flores, & Bluemel, 2013). This group included four leaders of color (all immigrants) and three White leaders (two in-all White programs). Frah Lee, an immigrant from South East Asia who led a mixed-ethnicity program with many youth from immigrant Asian families, said,

Whether that’s boy, girl, or Asian or non-Asian or Black-White. I don’t see those differences. I don’t like to be defined by a specific race. I don’t see the point in that at all. Like, what’s race? We’re human.

These leaders perceived few or no issues regarding race or culture in the program or in the youth’s futures. Only one leader identified a culture-related incident. Enrique Ceballos (a Latino immigrant) reported that an African American youth had accused him of making a racist comment. This made Enrique angry and he immediately called his supervisor to ask that the youth be removed from the program. The other six reported that the issue of culture “doesn’t come up,” youth did not form subgroups based on ethnicity, and “no one feels like a minority.” These leaders believed this philosophy was both fair-minded and effective in promoting openness to all cultural groups in the program. Research shows, however, that this universalist approach is ineffective because when the adults in an institutional setting do not discuss issues of difference the unspoken privileges of dominant groups go unchallenged and youth from nondominant groups can experience isolation and marginalization (NRC, 2000; Neville et al., 2013).

Limited and nonengagement. The 10 leaders in the second category recognized that culture-related incidents were important and affected youth, but they either did not engage with youth about the incidents or engaged in limited ways. All of these leaders reported at least one incident, and nearly all identified learning goals in relation to the incident, for example, they wanted youth to learn to respect or embrace ethnic differences or to teach youth to think critically about police profiling and other cultural issues. However, they did not appear to have the confidence or skills to act on these goals.

Nonengagement. When a culture-related incident occurred, about half of these leaders did not respond by talking with the youth. They reported that they felt uncomfortable, did not feel qualified, or thought this would be overstepping the boundaries of their responsibilities as leaders. In one example, Nicole Berman, a White leader of a mostly Latino arts program, had youth watch a video on the anniversary of the September 11th attacks,

with the aim of increasing their cultural understanding. During the video, she saw two youth drawing stereotyped caricatures of Middle Eastern men with guns. Although she recognized the drawings were offensive and contrary to her goals for the activity, she was more concerned about the youth not paying attention. She sanctioned them for that and did not discuss the drawings with them.

Limited engagement. The other half of the leaders in this category talked to youth about the incidents, but did so in ways that were unidirectional—that did not foster dialogue. Their goals were to teach youth or correct them. When a Black youth appeared to be struggling with his ethnic identification (described earlier), Bella Jensen told him, “You need to think. We’re in a White culture. It’s an American, White majority culture and that is what you are conforming to everyday. When you’re out getting a job, you’ve gotta conform to that.” The message to youth in most of these one-way communications was that they needed to accept the status quo and adapt themselves to it.

In some cases, leaders reported a response that resembled a lengthy monologue. Myla Lott described her approach to getting Latino and Black youth to understand the “harshness” of their using the N-word: “Me or Ricardo [co-leader] make it personal to us like, ‘That word affects me. That hurts me when I hear you guys say it.’” She went on to explain her goal in a conversation with one youth:

[R]eally educating her on that like, “This is where this term comes from and this is how it’s evolved and it’s something that people want to make it positive; you can make that judgment for yourself. But this is how it affects us here at [program] and this is a word we don’t use here.”

Research in college classrooms suggests that a unidirectional approach is not effective, and sometimes alienates students (Sue, 2013). Indeed, several leaders reported that this approach sometimes had undesired results. Myla Lott described an instance in which her challenge to a youth’s offensive remarks led him to “feel that I was trying to attack them and immediately run out the room.” Another leader (in the Constructive Engagement category) explained, “the second I preach to them is the second they stop listening.”

Constructive engagement. The 16 leaders in this category (eight in HS and eight in MS programs) all reported the two core elements of constructive engagement: engaging actively with youth and cultivating reflective dialogue. These leaders prioritized active engagement with youth around culture-related incidents, and they did not hesitate to take action. Desiree

Bustamante captured this: “Whenever I see an opening for me to tackle a conversation about culture, I go full-right-in. I go for it.” For incidents involving offensive remarks and discrimination, these leaders often described an urgency to respond immediately because they wanted “to let *everybody* know that it’s *not* okay.” They also wanted to *use* the learning opportunity presented by the incident—while youth’s emotions were engaged. As one said following a discrimination incident, “No way was I just gonna go on with a normal meeting and agenda.”

In our coding, these leaders’ strongest difference with the Limited Engagement leaders was that they created reflective dialogues. A key criterion we used for identifying these dialogues was that the conversations leaders described with youth were two-way; youth were partners. These leaders stressed the importance of listening to and honoring what youth had to say. Erin Murphy, a White leader, said,

I always question, question, question . . . Ya, don’t ever jump on them and be like, “That’s wrong.” Just ask, “What led you to that? Why did you think?” ‘Cuz that is exposing deeper issues that are going on.

Rather than giving directives, these leaders often reported using open-ended questions to initiate or guide reflective dialogue.

The constructive engagement leaders were much more articulate than other leaders in describing a set of short- and long-term goals that guided their responses to the incident. First, they sought to cultivate a “safe space” for discussing cultural issues. Tyler Bates, a White leader of an ethnically mixed program, wanted a space where youth felt “they can say things like, ‘I think I don’t get treated the same way as the White kids in my school,’ and for discussion if another student disagrees.” Creating a safe space included both making the program comfortable for this kind of discussion and responding to immediate incidents in ways that helped the youth involved feel safe discussing it. A related goal was validating youth’s thoughts, emotions, and cultural identities. These leaders also reported being guided by long-term learning goals, including helping youth empathize with diverse perspectives, learn language and concepts (e.g., stereotypes, profiling, bias), and develop skills for engaging in reflective dialogue in the future.

Younger youth. Leaders of MS programs described more steering of these reflective dialogues. These leaders often had specific learning goals they wanted to achieve in the situation (e.g., getting youth to feel ethnic pride, helping them understand a concept like racism), and they guided discussions to achieve these goals. For example, Ryan Uhl, a White coleader of an

ethnically mixed program, described an incident in which a Latina youth was describing a *quinceañera*, and another youth declared, “That’s weird.” Ryan said his response to this kind of situation starts with listening, “to hear what people are saying.” Then,

Making sure that the conversation is driven. If there’s something I know they’re not sharing, I will ask. I usually ask more questions and kind of model the appropriate question. Asking and also showing interest, like “Oh wow, that’s really neat! Here’s what my family does.” And then all the other kids are like “Oh wow, yeah, here’s what we do!” And so in that way it’s trying to keep it a healthy sharing conversation versus a “You’re different than me, I don’t want to talk to you.”

Ryan steered by asking questions and modeling the positive sharing he wanted youth to learn. Daniel Alvarez described steering similar discussions about identity incidents:

It’s just trying to guide them through questions, “Why are you saying that? Why do you think that?” And for me a lot of the time is asking them, “So, explain to me why you think that’s true.” And, they’ll give an explanation usually they’ll be like, “Oh, because this, this, and that,” and then I try to dig deeper.

Leaders of younger youth did more steering in these discussions because they perceived youth as less able to understand abstract concepts related to culture, for example, when it is appropriate to use the term *racist* and the idea that the membership of an ethnic group includes widely different kinds of people. Research substantiates that younger teens are just learning to apply abstract concepts related to culture, including discrimination and racial stereotypes (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013). Rather than trying to instruct, these leaders helped youth learn by talking about their thoughts and feelings. They validated youth’s experiences at the same time they used guided reflective dialogue to help youth learn use of new concepts.

Older youth. Leaders of HS programs described cultivating discussions that were more youth-driven. One leader said, “I didn’t do the talking. I facilitated them helping each other.” But leaders were actively engaged in various ways, for example, posing thought-provoking questions or introducing concepts that provided tools for youth’s thinking. Two examples follow.

Jenna Frank, leader of a program that included Latino and Somali youth, knew there were tensions and fights between these groups at their school,

which could emerge in the program. She recalled that one day: “Youth made some pretty broad generalizations and stereotyping of Somali youth. And so instantly it was BOOM! Explosion on both ends.” After stepping in to stop the shouting and calming youth down, Jenna told them:

“We need to talk about why this upsets [other youth]. Because these girls didn’t realize what they said would be so upsetting.” So I just stopped the whole [program activity]. We talked about stereotypes and: “What stereotypes do we see every day? Why are stereotypes harmful? Where do they come from? And then, if we can’t coexist in our own small group of 16, what does that say about our community?”

Jenna was assertive in stopping the “explosion” and restoring conditions where youth could reflect (e.g., by explaining that the youth’s remarks were not intended to be hurtful). Then she used questions to seed discussion of the processes of stereotyping that youth experience and participate in every day. The questions led to group reflection on what causes stereotypes and how they affect the group—their “community.”

Juanita Estrada was the coleader of a program that served a small group of Latino youth in a majority-White community. She described an incident where a youth arrived late to a program meeting having just experienced disturbing prejudice from the Director and members of a mostly White school band that he wanted to join:

[Antonio] had a really bad experience. He felt really rejected by the band members. And, he was really, really hurt. I asked him what happened and how he felt about it and his response. It kind of started there. He was willing to share all of it . . . he was kind of opening the door to say “You know, I want to talk about my feelings.”

Juanita then asked other youth if they experienced similar situations in the community where they felt this way. When they nodded their heads, “yes,” she mentioned that she had experience facilitating difficult discussions and asked the group if they wanted her to help them talk about Antonio’s experience. The youth agreed.

And when they started responding and they wanted to process it, we did. I followed their lead . . . it started to tap into some other nerves and into that whole experiences of prejudice. And I think that was where the others were in touch with those feelings . . . And it was kind of like, “This is how it is and this is what happens.” There wasn’t a lot of anger about it, we just sort of got it out there on the table.

Youth came together to support Antonio, share personal experiences, and discuss the dynamics of prejudice in their community. Juanita provided guidance by facilitating youth's processing of their experiences but followed their lead, and "When they were done, they were done . . . they got what they needed and that was it." She described it as a "turning point" for the youth, where they expressed a new level of "compassion and love" for each other. They started talking about discrimination in their school and community, which continued in future meetings.

These leaders believed in their older youth's capacity to learn about cultural issues through group processes of "sharing viewpoints," "tapping emotions," and "talking through." Leaders provided guidance and sometimes shared their experiences or provided concepts to aid youth's thinking. But youth's active dialogue often drove the learning process. Leaders described youth learning to support each other in dealing with culture-related issues and being proactive in calling out youth who made offensive comments. Research shows that older adolescents become able to better understand the individual and intergroup processes that influence racial attitudes, behavior, and conflict (Killen et al., 2013). These leaders knew youth were able to develop these skills, and supported them. One of these leaders concluded, "Don't underestimate kids."

Discussion

To create inclusive programs the field of youth development must be attuned to the distinct lived realities of all youth. In a seminal article, Spencer and Swanson (2013) articulated how the realities of youth of color are obscured from view by the unexamined Euro-centric assumptions that contribute to inequality at every level of American society. These range from federal policies, to media stereotypes of Black and Latino youth, to the structure of institutions in which youth spend time, to how youth are treated by teachers, police, and other adults. At the time we are writing this, disregard for the realities of youth of color has been made starkly apparent by an ongoing sequence of shooting deaths of unarmed Black youth (e.g., Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Laquan McDonald) and by a presidential campaign in which widespread hostility has been expressed toward immigrants. Spencer and Swanson demonstrated how these realities—including the unacknowledged systemic injustices experienced by youth of color—create increased vulnerability and a host of "extra" challenges for youth's development of a secure identity and sense of belonging in the world.

The key point is that when youth walk in the door of a program each day, these realities do not magically disappear. To the contrary, our findings suggest how youth's lived realities can be central to understanding culture-related

incidents and the underlying issues they present. Relatedly, our findings show how the most constructive leader responses to these incidents involved leaders helping youth take active roles in critical examination of these underlying issues. In this final section, we discuss how culture-related incidents should be understood as both complex challenges and important opportunities for program staff. Then, we discuss implications for practice, programs, and research.

Incidents as Challenges for Leaders (and for Youth)

Our analyses identified four categories of culture-related incidents, each presenting distinct issues and challenges for leaders. An important finding was that the challenges leaders saw in the incidents were often defined by challenges the incidents presented to youth. All four categories reflect the “extra” developmental challenges that Spencer and Swanson (2013) suggested are faced by youth of color coming of age in hostile and unjust environments.

The first two categories, *offensive comments* and *discrimination*, involve situations that leaders perceive as inappropriate or unjust for youth. The issues at stake for leaders included the feelings of disrespect, anger, hurt, and powerlessness that can come from repeated experiences of injustice. Evidence shows that youth can be affected as observers of unjust actions, even if they are not directly involved (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011). These incidents represent challenges to youth’s sense of self—challenges that can be magnified by their alignment with the vulnerabilities and challenges youth experience in other domains of their lives. Leaders also were concerned that, if unaddressed, these incidents will create a hostile program climate (isolating youth, creating tensions between groups); and that such incidents can have a cumulative negative effect on youth’s mental health (Ginwright, 2010; Spencer et al., 2006). Yet another concern for leaders—a developmental concern—was that some youth accepted acts of prejudice against them as normal.

The other two categories of incidents, those involving *discomfort with intercultural contact* and *cultural identification and identity*, deal with youth’s expression of internalized attitudes toward others and self. These reflect youth’s responses to the challenging realities and vulnerabilities many youth of color experience. For the first category, leaders were concerned that youth’s discomfort with other groups (mainly Whites) posed obstacles to their access to future life opportunities. For the second, leaders were concerned that youth had internalized negative Euro-centric perspectives of their ethnic group.

A complicating issue for leaders across categories is that their knowledge of a specific incident is often incomplete. They may not always know the cause or context for youth’s feelings or behavior, for example, what

experiences from outside the program might be triggering strong emotions and whether a youth made an offensive remark with intent or from ignorance. Adolescents are often exploring and experimenting, trying out different personas, and questioning their place in the world (Kiang et al., 2010), which can make it hard to know what they are thinking. In some cases, the same incident (e.g., use of the N-word) may have different meanings and elicit different feelings among youth. Despite the challenging and multilayered nature of these incidents, some leaders were able to respond in ways that were constructive.

Incidents as Opportunities, Including Opportunities for Youth Learning

Our findings show that program leaders differ substantially in how directly they respond to the issues at stake in culture-related incidents. One group held a universalist or race-blind philosophy, a position that culture is not important in their program. Neville et al. (2013) suggested that this philosophy—seeing everyone as the same—is a valuable “aspirational goal,” but studies show it can obscure real vulnerabilities and challenges experienced by youth of color. It may not be coincidental that members of this group (with one exception) did not report culture-related incidents. A second group of leaders reported culture-related incidents and recognized their significance, but did not respond to them or responded in limited and unidirectional ways (e.g., trying to lecture or correct youth). A number of these leaders saw the value of responding but appeared to lack the confidence, commitment, or skills to respond. The concern with these two groups, as we have said, is that nonresponse is an implicit endorsement of what happened in the incident and can increase the marginalization of the affected youth (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009). In interviews with Mexican American youth, Quintana (1998) found that practitioners lose credibility when they are not open and honest about the possibility of prejudice.

In contrast, leaders in the *Constructive Engagement* group responded by going “full-right-in.” They engaged actively with the issues, challenges, and learning opportunities presented by the incidents. Research finds that expert program leaders respond to dilemma situations in ways that address multiple issues and keep youth at the center (Walker & Larson, 2012). That is what these leaders did. They responded to the culture-related incidents with *active engagement* addressed to a set of short- and long-term goals focused on the youth. In the immediate situation, they challenged offensive comments, deescalated tension if needed, listened to youth to get their perspective, and cultivated (or restored) a “safe space” in which youth felt respected and different perspectives could be heard. Their longer term goals included creating an

inclusive program culture and helping youth learn about the complex issues of race, ethnicity, and power that influence their lives.

The key ingredient to addressing these longer term goals appeared to be leaders' facilitation of *reflective dialogue*. The components of these dialogues resembled those identified in other contexts, like college classrooms and restorative justice discussion circles (Gregory et al., 2015; Weinstein & Obear, 1992). These leaders facilitated and empowered youth to take ownership of processes in which they "dig deeper" into the issues underlying the culture-related incidents. These leaders did not presume they fully understood the issues or had the right answers; they felt youth should contribute to the understanding and unpacking. They supported processes in which youth drew on their experiences, analyzed situations, empathized with different perspectives, and learned through collective discussion. Leaders took roles within these discussions (as appropriate), including asking guiding questions and validating youth's thoughts with the goal of helping youth learn skills for critical thinking.

A useful component of these strategies was leaders facilitating youth's *use of their emotions as a tool for learning*. Leaders asked youth about feelings the culture-related incidents had aroused and encouraged "tapping emotions" as a means for learning. Processing emotions in this way can be a powerful method for young people to unpack internalized messages, hidden assumptions, and hurt about racial injustice (Ginwright, 2010; Kirshner, 2015). Watkins, Larson, and Sullivan (2007) found that youth's sharing of emotions experienced in culture-related situations (e.g., humiliation, anger, absurdity, joy) increased cross-group empathy and led to powerful insights about culture, power, and cultural identity. In our study, Juanita recounted how discussion of emotions around an incident of discrimination was a "turning point" that opened youth, as individuals and a group, to examining issues of race and prejudice in their community.

Youth's developmental stage appears to be important in how leaders facilitate these constructive dialogues. Studies find that younger teens are often just beginning to recognize the interpersonal dimensions of culture and race, including ethnic bias (Quintana, 1998). This may explain why leaders for this age group did more to clarify abstract interpersonal concepts and steer discussions. In contrast, leaders of older youth encouraged them to take leadership in discussions of culture-related incidents—promoting their learning from "sharing viewpoints" and "talking through." These leaders were supporting the youth's development of their emerging capacities to understand interpersonal dynamics, see others' perspectives, and reason about personal identity, including cultural identity (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Killen et al., 2013). These findings suggest that leaders should be attuned to the

developmental capabilities of their youth, so they can best support youth taking an active role in these constructive group processes.

Implications for Staff Practices

This study's findings suggest that culture-related incidents occur in many programs and should not be ignored. The following practices are suggested for frontline staff:

1. Cultivate a safe space for discussions about ethnicity, race, and power. Communicate the importance and principles for such discussions from the start of the program.
2. Interrupt situations immediately if needed to maintain an inclusive, respectful environment. Be prepared to put aside "business as usual" in order to address issues that are raised.
3. Acknowledge, listen, and assess incidents to recognize the varied issues that may be at stake.
4. Respond to incidents by fostering reflective dialogue. Use incidents as opportunities to promote a culture of open discussion, facilitate collective learning, and support youth's development of positive cultural identities.
5. Support youth's ownership and agency in these dialogues. Honor their voice and viewpoints. Support youth's development of skills for active listening, attending to emotions and different cultural perspectives, and speaking out in response to incidents. Use questions rather than directives to facilitate discussions.
6. Think developmentally. Offensive and self-deprecating comments by youth may be unintentional and result from lack of knowledge. Strategies for facilitating discussion need to be adapted to the developmental capabilities of youth.

Implications for Organizations

These guidelines for frontline staff cannot be implemented without devotion of continued concerted effort and support from the organizations in which programs reside and their administrators (Simpkins, Riggs, Ettekal, Ngo, & Okamoto, in this same special issue). Their role includes the following:

1. Actively prioritize cultural issues; communicate this priority to staff, youth, and parents.

2. Build staff skills for responding to culture-related incidents. Training should include helping staff examine their own assumptions and build their confidence in discussing issues of culture, race, and power (Outley & Witt, 2006). Examples of culture-related incidents can be used for reflective training, following procedures used with dilemmas of practice (Ross et al., 2016). Development of these cultural skills should be placed at a level of parity with other practitioner skills (Sue, Zane, et al., 2009).
3. Cultivate an organizational culture in which staff are supported in discussing the complexity of incidents and the effectiveness of different responses.

The field of youth development (including intermediary organizations, researchers, and funders) can also contribute by having their own conversation to recognize these incidents and identify best practices for responding to them.

Implications for Research

Our study focused on accounts from program leaders because we wanted to gain their perspective as decision makers. But the voices of youth and other protagonists are necessary to complement leaders' perspectives. As much of the discussion in this article focuses on the impact of culture-related incidents and leaders' responses on youth, it is especially important to obtain data from them. Studies are needed to examine variations in youth's reactions to incidents (e.g., as a function of type of incident, youth's ethnicity, and leaders' philosophy), how different leader responses are experienced by youth, and how they affect group dynamics and youth's learning. Another limitation in our data is that, despite our efforts to make leaders comfortable discussing culture, some had little to say and it is likely that some provided "edited" accounts. The same incompleteness can be expected in youth interviews. Collection of observational data is a way to address this limitation (Suárez-Orozco, Casanova, et al., 2015) and should be a third methodological cornerstone of future research. Finally, this study yielded little information about the distinct issues of European American youth and of programs that primarily serve this group, despite their representation in our sample. A preliminary study of culture-related incidents in mainly White summer camps demonstrates glaring ways in which Eurocentrism, assumed White privilege, and insensitivity by both youth and staff can lead to injustices toward and isolation of youth of color (Perry, 2016). Creativity is needed to design research to examine constructive and unconstructive processes across all youth and programs.

Conclusion

This study revealed that leaders of youth programs are confronted with culture-related incidents involving events inside and outside the program, and these leaders vary in their desire and ability to deal effectively with these incidents. We should note that none of the arts, technology, and leadership programs we studied aimed for youth to gain comprehensive understanding of structural racism and systemic injustice, and many leaders felt unprepared for this type of discussion. Programs that prioritize issues of culture and race go further in helping youth see the roots of injustice and in empowering youth to progress from reflection to developing skills for taking action (Kirshner, 2015; Quiroz-Martínez et al., 2004). In closing, we must stress that although it is important to help youth understand culture-related incidents and the underlying issues they represent, this does not supplant the wider urgency that societies take action to eliminate the causes of cultural inequality and injustice.

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1. All names in text are pseudonyms.

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