

CHANGING PLACES



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HOW COMMUNITIES WILL IMPROVE
THE HEALTH OF BOYS OF COLOR

**Edited by Christopher Edley Jr.
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With a foreword by Robert Phillips



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Cover: The cover image was designed by Oakland, California-based printmaker and digital artist Favianna Rodriguez. Using high-contrast colors and vivid figures, her composites reflect literal and imaginative migration, global community, and interdependence. She has lectured widely on the use of art in civic engagement and the work of bridging community and museum, local and international. Rodriguez is coeditor of *Reproduce and Revolt!* with stencil artist and art critic Josh MacPhee (Soft Skull Press, 2008). An unprecedented contribution to the Creative Commons, this two-hundred-page book contains more than six hundred bold, high-quality black and white illustrations for royalty-free creative use. Rodriguez's artwork also appears in *The Design of Dissent* (Rockport Publishers, 2006), *Peace Signs: The Anti-War Movement Illustrated* (Edition Olms, 2004), and *The Triumph of Our Communities: Four Decades of Mexican Art* (Bilingual Review Press, 2005).

A RADICAL-HEALING APPROACH FOR BLACK YOUNG MEN

A Framework for Policy and Practice

Shawn Ginwright

ABSTRACT

This chapter argues for a shift to an asset-based approach in creating policies to improve the lives of black men and boys—assets often overlooked by policymakers and researchers. This approach, called radical healing, can help build more effective strategies and public policy for the most troubled black youth populations. I explore the ways in which young black men (ages fifteen to twenty) discuss their fathers, manhood, racism, violence, and rage with love, compassion, and care in a community support group. Building from legal scholar Athena Mutua's (2006) notion of progressive black masculinities, this chapter illustrates how support groups can change beliefs about black masculinity. I conclude with policy and practice recommendations based on the radical-healing framework.

■
How does it feel to be a problem?

W.E.B DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*

BACKGROUND

As I drove with my seven-year-old daughter, Nyah, to our home in East Oakland, she noticed a group of African American teens hanging out on

a corner near our neighborhood. Cool fall weather had settled in the Bay Area, and all the young men were wearing large gray or black jackets with hoods. As we turned the corner and passed them, my daughter asked, “Daddy, are they dangerous?” I restrained myself from being shocked at her question and pretended that I didn’t know whom she was talking about. As she wiped the ice cream from her face, Nyah pointed toward the group of five young men. “Those men right there, are they dangerous?”

“Why do you think they are dangerous, honey?” I replied. “They don’t seem to be bothering anyone.” Her question deeply concerned me. How could my own daughter simply look at a group of black youth and conclude that they might be dangerous? Had I somehow contributed to her stereotype of black youth in Oakland? She knew numerous black youth from my work in the community and from attending Saturday-morning activities at Leadership Excellence, an Oakland-based community organization.

“Because I always see the police take them away,” she said. Despite the fact that my wife and I teach our children to be proud of being black through positive black images throughout our home, Nyah’s perceptions of black youth had been influenced by television and observations of police interactions. The fact of the matter was that images from the news and seeing police interact with youth outweighed her own positive personal interactions with black youth.

Unfortunately, negative images that portray black youth as a “menace to society” also influence public policy. Nightly news stories of shootings involving young black men, films that depict black youths as dangerous criminals, and newspaper reports of rising crime among black teens all contribute to the negative image of black youths (Dance 2002). These images reinforce racist fears of black people among the general public and have an indelible impact on public policy. For example, policing practices that target black youth have resulted in disproportionate arrest rates in San Francisco. Despite the fact that blacks comprised only 7.3 percent of San Francisco’s total population in 2005, they made up more than 50 percent of the total arrests that year, the highest rate of arrests among blacks in California.¹ Public policy advocates and criminologists suggest that misperceptions about black youth and crime among law-enforcement agencies has contributed to policing practices that target black youth in their neighborhoods (Elikann 1999; Males 1999; Males and Macallair 2000).

African American males face a number of obstacles to educational success, economic mobility, and well-being (Littles, Bowers, and Gilmer 2008; Noguera 2008; Young 2004). Structural barriers including poor-quality schools and fewer job opportunities have limited the life chances for black

males in comparison to their white counterparts. These barriers are sometimes justified by negative perceptions held by white employers, police, and teachers, and are often based on the fear that black men are dangerous and a threat to public safety (Wilson b 1996). Extensive research has shown how sentencing laws, policing practices, and public policy have all contributed to disproportionate numbers of incarcerated and adjudicated black men (Brunson and Miller 2006; Mincy 2006; Young 2004). Scholars have also illustrated how film, television news, and even social science research have portrayed young black males in ways that reinforce negative perceptions in the minds of policy stakeholders (Hutchinson 1994). Images of young black men have “a way of maintaining themselves in the public’s mind and in the absence of quality information and analyses, these images have become the primary prisms through which people construct an understanding of social reality” (Sánchez-Jankowski 1991: 288).

As mentioned, social science research has also contributed to negative perceptions of black men. This is largely because researchers have become focused on describing and predicting negative behavior, including violence, aggression, idleness, and survival strategies (Anderson 1990; Anderson 1999; Wilson 1996). This myopic focus on young black men has a long tradition in social science research, and as a result, researchers and policy stakeholders have not adequately understood the assets among black men. These assets—such as social support networks formed in barbershops, and informal and positive mentoring of younger boys on the basketball court—can be a rich source to build effective public policy to support the development of black young men.

An asset-based approach avoids simply documenting disparities among black and white young men and boys; rather, the focus is on questions about what is good about black young men’s behavior. When public policy focuses on assets, stakeholders focus on questions: What is good about young black men’s behavior? How do black young men navigate systems and policies in ways that contribute to individual and community health and well-being? How do black men care for one another? These questions are vitally important for public policy, given the preponderance of youth programs and services in urban black communities that focus almost entirely on preventing problems rather than creating opportunities for social action.

This chapter argues for a shift to an asset-based approach in creating policies to improve the lives of black men and boys—assets often overlooked by policymakers and researchers. This approach, called radical healing, can help build more effective strategies and public policy for the most troubled black youth populations. This essay explores the ways in

which young black men (ages fifteen to twenty) discuss their fathers, manhood, racism, violence, and rage with love, compassion, and care in a community support group.

BEYOND PATHOLOGY: TOWARD AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH TO PUBLIC POLICY

W.E.B. DuBois's "The Study of the Negro Problems" (1898) and *The Philadelphia Negro* (DuBois 1899) provided one of the first theoretically informed ethnographies of black urban life. Early in his career, DuBois was interested in describing the conditions and behaviors within black communities that he believed contributed to urban problems. For DuBois black social problems could be explained largely through an understanding of the impact of enslavement and its effects on black progress through examining social behaviors, physical surroundings, and work patterns. "We have two great causes for the present conditions of the Negro," he wrote, "slavery and emancipation with their attendant phenomena of ignorance, lack of discipline and moral weakness. . . . [And] the physical surrounding of house and home and ward, the moral encouragements and discouragements which he encounters" (DuBois 1898: 283).

DuBois's conclusion about problems in black life involves two fundamental elements that continue to shape the study of black communities in general and black men in particular. The first is that black problems can be best conceptualized as a "symptom" of broader social, economic, and structural factors. Thus crime, violence, and moral decay are not endemic to black communities, but rather the result of being locked out of good jobs, being forced into poor housing, and participating in poor-quality schools. Second, the environment and social settings in which black men go about their daily lives are rich with cultural information that can help to better understand values, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs in black communities. More recently, research has focused more directly on how structural factors like joblessness influence values and behaviors among black men (Anderson 1999; Wilson 1996a).

Still researchers continue to depict black male youth as contentious and define their behavior through tough postures, potential violence, and maladaptive behaviors (Anderson 1999). For example, Elijah Anderson's (1999) ethnography of black families in Philadelphia details how rules, norms, and values unique to urban poverty foster violence and other problematic behaviors among black youth. His perspective of violent and high-risk

behavior, particularly related to youth, is viewed as a function of local beliefs and values that are adaptations to economic deprivation. For black male youth violence is thus an accepted code of conduct. The black youth participating in violence gain respect among their peers, while others participate in violence as a way to navigate risky confrontations on the streets. By focusing only on violence, however, Anderson fails to capture the mosaic of experiences and textured realities of black young men's lives. This focus has resulted in an "exceptionally myopic view of [black men's] humanity" (Young 2004: 20). Unfortunately, these discussions about black men's lives remain restricted to static conceptualizations of masculinity, rigid frames about work and family life, and distorted views about behavior.

Associating black young men with violence has become common in the media. Consider the ways in which the general public views violence and homicides among black youth (*We Interrupt This Message* 2001). Newspapers and evening news accounts of gang violence in urban black communities conveys the notion that the death of a gang member is less significant than the death of a student. Homicides among gang members are framed by the media in such a way that suggests that death from gang involvement deserves little sympathy. Rather than discussing how years of disinvestment in black communities has created joblessness, for example, the general public asks, "Where is the tragedy?" (Johnson 1995: 219). Educational researcher Jennifer Alleyne Johnson has accurately stated that the general public has come to view violence among black youth as a normal fact of life and therefore has become desensitized to the death of black youth. From her article "Life after Death," she explains:

Violence becomes the word that both subsumes one event (the tragedy of the victim's death) and qualifies another action (a brutal homicide). In addition, this framework defines the actors as potential menaces to society, thereby undermining any sympathy when lives are taken by an act of violence. As a result, the public feels a macabre sense of relief when it is reported that the "menaces" killed each other. Death framed as violence begs the question, "Where is the tragedy?" This framework leaves no room to mourn a family member lost to a brutal death. On an even more insidious level, the "violent" framing of African American homicide incriminates both the assassin and the deceased. Looking at death only through a lens of violence generates silence around the issue of this death as loss. Thus, the tragedy and overall impact of death felt by surviving African American adolescents is hidden by mainstream society's inability and unwillingness to deal with the issue of death or with the brutal way most Black adolescents encounter death. In this harsh light and harsher silence stands the African American adolescent whose friend or loved one was gunned down. (Johnson 1995: 219)

The persistent intellectual and public fetish of the problems of black young males has grossly obscured an understanding of social and behavioral assets shared among black young men, regardless of their social class and income. This chapter raises questions regarding alternative ways in which young black men care for one another, share advice, or help each other develop their beliefs about manhood. Recent research has given us a rare glimpse into the worldviews and “meaning making” of black men and their aspirations (Young 2004). The research illustrates how individuals can act on their environment in ways that improve their quality of life and that of others (Smith 2007; Young 2004). Focusing on agency (the capacity to make choices and act) demonstrates how black men make meaning out of dire situations and sometimes act to change their life chances.

Sociologist Alford Young’s (2004) work is important because it extends our view of young black male behavior beyond the conceptual boundaries of labor, crime, and notions of extinction. For many of us working in education, youth development, and community-based organizations, positive change is often viewed as “fixing” black youth. The very structure of funding often requires that we reduce youth violence, increase academic performance, or prepare youth for employment. The emphasis on programs that exclusively focus on harm reduction or prevention simply is not enough. Problem negation is not a social-justice approach. Social-justice educators and teachers must learn to connect resistance with creating; organizing with dreaming; and activism with hope. Making these connections provides us with a more holistic and richer understanding of what constitutes social-justice forms of public policy.

RADICAL HEALING AS A POLITICAL ACT IN BLACK COMMUNITY LIFE

“Radical healing” is a framework used to understand the assets of black young men. It examines the capacity of black young men to act upon their environment in ways that contribute to well-being for the common good. This framework allows policymakers, educators, and practitioners to understand how hope, joy, and a sense of possibility contribute to individual well-being, community health, and broader social justice. Research on education, social movements, and youth development has not adequately addressed the theoretical significance of suffering nor does it consider the significance of hope. Radical healing is rooted in a vibrant community life through which love, hope, and goodness can solve problems. Hope and imagining are important prerequisites for activism and social change.

We must inspire youth to understand that community conditions are not permanent and that imagining new possibilities is the first step to change.

Radical healing involves building the capacity of young people to act upon their environment to create the type of communities in which they want to live. By integrating issues of power, history, identity, and the possibility of collective agency and struggle, radical healing rebuilds communities that foster hope and political possibilities for young people. This process acknowledges the ways in which joblessness, poverty, violence, and poor education have been toxic to black communities. At the same time this process fosters new forms of political and community life. By rebuilding collective identities (racial, gendered, youth), exposing youth to critical thinking about social conditions, and building activism, we can help black youth heal. Radical healing is much broader than simply moving from pathology to wellness. The concept focuses on how hope, imagination, and care transform the capacity of communities to confront community problems. For young people healing fosters a collective optimism and a transformation of spirit that over time contributes to a healthy and vibrant community life for all.

An important part of the radical-healing framework is the use of caring relationships that connect people to meaningful acts of resistance. In this sense a caring relationship refers not simply to individual acts of kindness, but rather to a relationship that prepares black youth to understand themselves in terms of a long history of struggle and triumph. In communities ravaged by violence, crime, and poverty, care is perhaps one of the most revolutionary antidotes to urban trauma because it facilitates healing and a passion for justice. Without investments in caring relationships, young people's anger and frustration from negative experiences are pent up and sometimes explode in violence. Care within the black community is as much a political act as it is a personal gesture because it requires that the relationship prepare black youth to confront racism and view their personal trauma as a result of systemic social problems.

Traditional modes of care in black communities have always been central in sustaining black life and affirming black identity in the context of brutal racism. Caring relationships among church members, in neighborhoods, and in the workplace provide black communities with a sanctuary to heal from difficult life situations. By discussing fears and concerns as well as hopes and dreams, caring relationships are important ways to foster hope. These modes of care function as buffers and as cultural armor that create and sustain community life and "ways of life and struggle that embody values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence" (West 1993). These views of care were defined not by compassion but by communal

survival, where community members would support one another in undergoing personal hardships, including death, illness, or loss of shelter. There are few community spaces for black youth to heal from trauma they experience. Schools rarely have opportunities or are ill prepared to engage young people in a healing process. Often schools actually breed violence through draconian rules and a fetish for control, containment, and punishment.

To be effective, public policy should focus on strategies, pathways, and opportunities to build the capacity of black young men to improve the material aspects of their lives. Power and control over life situations are key to social justice and wellness (Prilleltensky 2008; Prilleltensky, Nelson, and Peirson 2001). Wellness encompasses more than striving for the absence of risks and the elimination of community problems. Rather, it focuses on how to create the social conditions where individuals and communities can thrive. Wellness and social-justice programs illustrate how young people's aspirations to create better schools, safe neighborhoods, and vibrant community life require developing individuals and their communities. The relationship between social justice and wellness is an important aspect of radical healing. Individuals seek power and control both at the personal level, through their own decision making, and at the political level by organizing their neighborhood to influence public policy. This pursuit of justice and freedom yields both internal capacity to confront oppression while building social capital and a greater external capacity to create better community conditions.

There are places of refuge, often hidden from public view, that allow African American youths to reconcile, confront, and heal their psychic wounds. However, these spaces are often misunderstood and grossly undertheorized. Healthy community-building allows for black youths to remove the masks and tough exteriors they need to survive and encourages them to share their problems, hopes, and dreams. Support groups, mentoring, and simply spending time together builds opportunities for black youths to care, love, dream, imagine, and hope. Through testimony, dialogue, and witnessing, we can understand an affirming love for humanity and justice. This way of conceptualizing care also builds from prior treatments of social capital, which focus on the ways in which mutual trust facilitates community action (Ginwright and Cammarota 2007).

What follows are case studies in radical healing in the daily life of young black men, ages fifteen to eighteen. Located in Oakland, California, the Men Educating, Creating, Action (MECA) support group provides participants with a supportive space to share their ideas, dreams, and concerns. The conversations during these support group meetings provide young

men with a sense of purpose, direction, and hope. Key to these discussions is the way in which a sense of purpose, direction, and hope is translated to civic action that addresses the material reality of participants' lives. The data for these case studies were collected over a three-year period (2005 to 2008) and largely consisted of participant observation and interviews of ten African American youths from Leadership Excellence (LE), a community-based organization in Oakland that works primarily with African American youth. My observations occurred largely during the organization's summer events, such as summer camps, and during weekly political education meetings. These observations also extended into the youths' schools, local shopping centers, and occasionally their homes. My process involved collecting extensive field notes of observations of group meetings at the summer program, conversations as the youths traveled to other parts of the city, and one-on-one informal conversations.

During my participation and observations in many of the meetings, discussions, and summer programs, I was not a distant, objective observer. In fact, I often facilitated many of the group sessions. As the founder-director, I designed many of the programs and pedagogical strategies. I am also a longtime resident of Oakland and have a rather wide social network of individuals, families, and institutions that all have, at one time, worked with me on issues to improve the quality of life for Oakland's youth. As a result, numerous informal conversations with public officials, teachers, school board members, youth workers, and community residents about life in Oakland influenced these case studies.

CASE STUDIES IN RADICAL HEALING

When I arrived at the support group for young men in May 2008, I was somewhat surprised that there were only twelve young men at the Men Educating, Creating, Action (MECA) support group. Bilal, the program coordinator, had told me several times about the powerful and insightful discussions youths often have during the Thursday-night meetings. There were no predetermined topics during the MECA support group's discussions. Young men would show up, and the facilitator would begin to check in with everyone. Someone's comment would spark a conversation that led to a larger group discussion. Sometimes they would talk about a new movie, other times they would talk about relationships. MECA was a place where the young men could be themselves and talk about whatever was on their minds.

The discussions were usually facilitated by Bilal, a streetwise and self-

educated thirty-year-old who worked part time for Leadership Excellence and part time for Federal Express at the Oakland Airport. Bilal's ability to navigate the streets has earned him a great deal of respect among the young men at MECA. During the support group sessions, he would challenge the young men's preconceived notions of manhood. Bilal's constant questioning and prodding would force the young men to think deeply. One night the conversation focused on the young men's fathers. Some of the young men held animosity toward their fathers, while others commented about how fortunate they were to have their fathers in their lives. These conversations were personal reflections, but they constituted a political education. The reflections on their fathers were entryways to understand the social, political, and economic realities in their lives.

Bilal was an important reason why these young men felt open and safe to share with each other. He was respected and looked up to; the young men knew that he had a story similar to their own. Bilal was what sociologist Antwi Akom (2006) has referred to as a "new old head"—an older man who spends time in barbershops, malls, and on basketball courts where youth congregate, to provide guidance. In some cases the new old heads may have been formerly incarcerated but no longer participate in illegal street life. Rather, they support young people with positive decision making. These are *not* exactly the "new old heads" whom urban sociologist Elijah Anderson (1990) described in his ethnography of the Northton community. As Anderson (1990: 103–4) explained it, a new old head "feels hardly any obligation to his string of women and the children he has fathered. In fact he considers it a measure of success if he can get away without being held legally accountable. . . . For him women are so many conquests, whose favors are obtained by 'running a game.' . . . Self-aggrandizement consumes his whole being . . . on the corner he attempts to influence others by displaying the trappings of success."

New old heads at MECA were more closely aligned with Akom's (2006) discussion of "old heads"—usually thirty-something African American working-class males who are not involved with gangs or drugs. They are considered "hustlers," defined as "a person who defies traditional social norms by sometimes working outside the formal economy, often without the privilege of possessing mainstream educational credentials, placing him squarely on the bottom of the new urban economy" (Akom 2006: 82). Akom departs from Anderson's conceptualization of new old heads, arguing that old heads care about young black men and impart life lessons at Raider games, on fishing trips, and have influence and respect that is rooted in caring—not intimidation.

One night the young men at MECA were discussing the movie *American Gangster*. The movie chronicles the life of Frank Lucas, a celebrated drug dealer who built one of America's largest crime organizations. The young men celebrated Frank Lucas for his ruthless, shrewd business practices. Bilal simply asked, "How did Frank Lucas help or hurt the black community? Is that the type of man *you* want to be?" Without telling young people what to think, he sparked discussions about their perceptions of manhood. Bilal's questioning supported lessons about masculinity, sexism, misogyny, and power.

When Vince, a streetwise sixteen-year-old, first participated in the MECA support group, he held some of the strongest and most sexist views about women. It wasn't until he was confronted and constantly challenged by Bilal and other young men that his views about women began to change. "My definition of what it meant to be a man was contorted because before coming to MECA," Vince recalled, "I figured being a man was like how much money was in your pockets. So if I'm a man, I got to have the biggest stacks. I have to crack on anybody who is in my way to get what I need, which was defined by how much I got in my pocket." Vince began to develop a new understanding of manhood through conversations at MECA meetings, as Bilal questioned and discussed views of manhood with the group. Bilal was not simply teaching these young men about manhood in formal lessons from a book; he modeled the behavior in his own daily life. "In order for me to reach these youngstas," he said, "I have to be 'bout it! I can't tell them something like, 'Black women are queens,' then turn around and call a woman a bitch. I have to live what I want to see in them. I have to believe it, live it, and be it." Bilal's strong commitment to social justice was contagious.

Vince's Homecoming

After a few months of attending MECA meetings, Vince mentioned to the group that he wanted to see if he could get over the hatred he held for not having his father in his life. He wanted to go up to the county jail where he had recently heard that his father was incarcerated and tell him how he felt about not having him around. Another young man in the group confirmed that he too wanted the opportunity to meet his father and confront him about not having him in his life. Bilal suggested that they go up to the jail and that nothing was holding them back from doing what they wanted to do. Vince took Bilal's advice and found out when he could visit the county jail and talk to his father. Taking one of the most courageous steps of his

life, he placed his name on the visitor list at the jail and wrote his father's name next to his.

Vince recalled: "I just had to see him—his face—and I wanted to see his reaction when I told him that I was Dorothy's son, *his* son. At first he didn't really know who I was until I told him. The first thing he said to me was, 'You done grown up so fast!' I thought to myself, *Don't hold back, tell him exactly what I want him to know.* So I said to him, 'How would you know, you never were around to see me!' He just sort of sat there when I said that. I told him how much he hurt me for not being there. I told him I wished he was around to show me how to knot my tie on prom night. I wanted him to tell me to run faster at my football practices. I wanted him to get on me for not doing my homework! You know, all that kind of shit. I got emotional and started to cry because I was so angry at him. I wanted him to know how much he hurt me and my family."

Vince's father didn't respond with excuses, blaming his mother or blaming the system the way Vince had anticipated. What his father told him shook Vince to the core. His father looked directly into his eyes and said with a low, sincere voice that he was so very sorry for causing Vince and his mother so much pain. "Nothing I can say or do will ever heal that; I did y'all wrong and I'll have to live with that for the rest of my life. But you, Vince, can make another choice and not repeat the mistakes I made." Vince wasn't ready to hear that from his father. He was prepared for excuses from his father and would have preferred a heated confrontation with him. Instead, he saw his father shed tears right in front of him for the pain he had caused. The encounter was overwhelming: they both cried and shed tears without words, not really knowing what to say but feeling they were headed in the right direction.

Vince returned to MECA with a sense of accomplishment. He had finally done what he had only imagined: he had confronted his father and begun a reconciliation. The other young men were so intrigued by what Vince had done that a flurry of questions preempted the scheduled topic for the evening. "What did he say to you, Vince?" "How did you get into the visiting hours?" "Did he know who you were?" "Did you curse him out?" One by one, Vince responded to the questions. He realized that his encounter with his father was about more than his own individual healing; his act of courage had opened the doorway for his father to heal as well.

When Vince returned to the jail the following week, his father smiled, glad to see him again. They talked about why he had not been around, and they laughed at small things Vince remembered about his father before he was incarcerated, such as the time he had given Vince a sip of beer when

his mother wasn't looking. After several weeks of these meetings, his father confessed to him that there were "a lot of guys in here who would love to do this. You know, talk with children they didn't do right by, but they scared, Vince, they don't know what to say or where to start." Sometimes ideas emerge from the spirit over long periods of time, and other times ideas appear with lightning speed. Vince felt a sense of inspiration, fear, and concern that he had never experienced before. But something deep inside him told him that he needed to connect more incarcerated fathers with their children.

Vince didn't know what to expect on the first day that a group of incarcerated fathers met with their children at the jail. He would have been pleased if three or four men attended, despite all the work and time that organizing the session required. Maneuvering visiting hours, meal times, instructional classes, and permissions from the jail's warden, however, was not as difficult as he had anticipated—thanks in part to Bilal's help and guidance. When Vince walked into the room, he was surprised to find all twenty of the chairs filled with men wanting to renew their relationships with their children and to hear their children share their stories. Vince recalled: "I can't really describe the feeling to know that this was happening because of something I did. Meeting my father changed my life, because when I released all the hate that I was holding, it was like there was more space for positive things to come in my life."

By letting go of his pain and anger, Vince was able to act on behalf of others. Every Tuesday at 6 p.m., the group would meet to hear from fathers and their children. The rules for these meetings were simple: sit in a circle, share your story, do not blame others, and tell the truth. Vince had learned from Bilal that everyone had a story to tell—some profound, others ordinary. Giving people the opportunity to testify and bear witness to their stories was a powerful healing tool. If supported in a community, this experience can transform one's spirits and open up new possibilities. Vince's homecoming was more than a reconciliation with his father. It illustrates how the convergence of the personal and political domains of civic life can contribute to activism. For Vince, creating the fathers' group was not simply an individual act driven by personal motivation, but rather an example of new conceptions of masculinity and agency. Support groups like MECA can become a way for black young men to develop clear visions of their lives and a sense that they can change things in their communities.

Mutua's (2006) notion of masculinity suggests that progressive black masculinities must promote human freedom, embrace dignity, and celebrate justice. For young black men, remaking masculinity in ways that

promote healing, justice, and freedom are significant because this process resists negative images of black men and recasts these images in ways that more accurately reflect the fears and dreams, the doubts and imagination of young black men's lives. This notion of masculinity offers a new dimension of activism and another entry point into civic engagement for African American youth. This process involves building the capacity to heal from personal and social issues, developing young people's political consciousness to understand the root causes of these issues, and preparing them to act in ways that solve personal and social problems. The urban sociologist Martin Sánchez-Jankowski (2002) has reminded us that we need a more nuanced understanding of civic life for youths who have histories of experiencing racial discrimination, personal trauma, and exclusion from mainstream civic activities. Through progressive ideas about masculinity, these young men were able to reengage in community life in ways that were consistent with their new beliefs about manhood.

Kevin's Rebound

Kevin started participating in a black male support group called Brotha's Keeper. Between ten and fifteen young men from ages fourteen to twenty-five met every Thursday night to talk about issues ranging from personal loss to academic success. The support group gave Kevin an opportunity to grapple with the murder of his friend and to address the rage and numbness he was experiencing as a result. Connecting to other youth who had experienced similar trauma provided Kevin with a rare space to heal.

He recalled: "The only way I would deal with this stuff before I came here was to drink. But that would make me real evil. All the rage would just come out to such an extent that my partners would tell me I need to stop drinking. I really didn't know how to deal with this trauma. I don't know about getting a psychologist or something like that, 'cuz if I go see a psychologist, how they gonna tell me 'bout something they never been through? The group of brothas really helped me see what happened and deal with it differently. We talked about all types of little things that would keep my mind off of the streets. One time I got up and told a story about what happened with [my friend] Amir. The energy in the room was cool so everybody in the room was getting up to tell their stories so I kinda got a chance to let out some of my emotions. Everybody was emotional, so you know what I'm saying? I got to tell my story and just based off the energy in the room, I got a chance to let out my feelings."

These types of experiences were critical to Kevin's healing process. By

being in a safe environment, he felt safe to listen to other young men's stories but he also felt secure and empowered enough to share his own. These environments are not easy to create. In fact, many of the young men come from rival gang turfs. The leader of the young men's group, however, takes time to prepare each young man by taking him on a retreat to build a sense of trust and community. The retreat offers a space of trust and respect, where young people feel they can share their experiences openly.

Care and Rebuilding in Community Life

Care is also facilitated by building critical consciousness among black youth and providing opportunities and space for political expression and engagement. For example, in March 2003, Oakland's chief of police, mayor, and the local congresswoman convened a town hall meeting to learn more about the community's experience of police misconduct. Dereca Blackmon, the director of Leadership Excellence, was asked to attend the meeting to represent Oakland's youth. Dereca recalled: "When I got to the meeting, it was the usual cast of characters: the Mayor, Congresswoman Barbara Lee, and the Chief of Police. We were there to talk about youth but there were no youth at the table. So I called a few youth who were hanging out at the LE center and asked them to come and represent and speak their mind to these so-called leaders. When they arrived, they got on the open mic and blew everyone away."

Kevin approached the microphone and everyone immediately focused on how he was dressed. His baggy jeans, oversized "hoody" sweatshirt, tennis shoes, and shoulder-length locks epitomized the urban uniform for young black males in Oakland. Despite the fact that this style of dress is common among urban youth, black young males who dress this way are often labeled as thugs and troublemakers by the police and are frequently targeted for surveillance and searches. Kevin talked about his experience with the police: "I just want to be real with y'all. When I am out there, I feel like a target for the police. People see me, and look at the way I dress, and treat me less than a man, less than human! I feel like a target for self-destruction! Sometimes I feel like giving up, fuck it! But I am a wise person. You cannot judge me by the way I look because I know what wisdom is inside me, and I just need the opportunity for you to see me for who I am."

By providing opportunities to let black youth articulate their feelings about the police, Leadership Excellence challenges the negative images of black youth in public policy and recasts black youth as key civic partners in community-change efforts. Equally important is the mutual trust that

developed between Dereca and Kevin. Because Leadership Excellence creates a space for black youth to be heard and recasts black youth as political actors, Kevin pushed himself to live up to the positive political expectation that LE staff holds of him. He explained: “They [the LE adults] see stuff that you don’t see in yourself, and they try to bring it out of you. They see me as an activist or something, and I’m not political like that. But when Dereca lets me speak my mind to folks like the mayor and political people, it makes you want to live up to that image, you know.”

Care is created between LE youth and adults through mutual trust and reciprocity. The adults expect black youth to engage in political affairs; in turn, black youth think of civic and community change as their responsibility. LE recreates negative images of black youth by creating opportunities for young people to engage in positive civic activities. The expectations that LE adults have about black youth turn them from civic problems to community activists. Care also involves creating a collective racial and cultural identity among black youth to provide them with a unified understanding of their plight in American society. This is important, given the entrenched notions black youth hold in urban communities, where they have been socialized to view each other through fragmented, often adversarial neighborhood identities (for example, East Oakland versus West Oakland).

The rich and meaningful relationships Kevin developed at Leadership Excellence contributed to a new consciousness about his own life and provided him with a sense of purpose. The meeting at City Hall that Kevin attended was broadcast on C-SPAN and was seen by thousands of people throughout the country. After learning about the significance of his comments and his newfound activist identity, Kevin became more eager to learn all he could so that he could be a better advocate for other black youth in Oakland. But he had not completed high school or received his GED. Dereca had been nudging Kevin to enroll in a program, but her constant encouragement to get his GED only reminded him of what he had not accomplished. Dereca continued to push him about his future plans. Despite the fact that he was deeply committed to social justice and had begun to organize his own block, he still had not completed school. She told him that he had to get his GED and that all he was doing was good, but that without an education, he would eventually end up back on the streets. Kevin never did well in school, nor did he really see the need to get his GED; this made their conversations tense. Shortly after their discussion about his GED, Kevin stopped coming to work, stopped participating in the programs, and disappeared from the LE community entirely.

Dereca fears that she pushed him away because she pressed him so hard

about getting his GED. She says: “He just stop [*sic*] coming to work! I didn’t see or hear from Kevin in nearly three months! This is after talking to him almost every day. I was hysterical, asking everyone if they know what was going on with him. I didn’t know if he was alive or what. I talked to some of his friends here and they told me that they see him sometimes but he seemed distant, and he really didn’t have much to say to them. What did I say to push him away? Why didn’t he call or come around? Deep inside I was tore up because I knew I had pushed him away. After about three months, I was sitting right here at my desk in my office and he just showed up out of nowhere! I just burst into tears when I saw him. I asked, ‘Where have you been? Why didn’t you call? What is going on with you?’ I cried and hugged him even though I was so upset. He said to me, ‘I thought a lot about what you said and I wanted to do more with my life.’ He pulled out a picture of himself in his graduation cap holding his GED diploma and said, ‘Look, it’s me!’ I just cried and I still have the picture. He had been going to school the entire time, working on his GED. Then he told me, ‘And I also got my driver’s license!’ We hugged and cried together, then I hit him and told him, ‘Don’t you ever do that to me again—you could have called me and told me what you were doing!’”

The author Janelle Dance (2002) has encouraged us to think more seriously about what she calls “the power of humane investments.” These are the investments in young people’s lives that require that we see in them more than they see in themselves. These investments build relationships that raise expectations about the possibilities in young people’s lives. Dereca’s investments in Kevin illustrate that one of the first steps in the healing process is to care more radically about black youth. This means that we ask not so much what we can do for black youth, but more important, how relationships can recalibrate what black youth do for themselves.

The educational researcher Jennifer Alleyne Johnson’s (1995) examination of black youth has reinforced the need to develop caring relationships with youth in classroom settings. She argues that there is a need to “make connections between the day-to-day realities of students’ lives and the day-to-day process of teaching and learning that takes place in urban public schools across the United States” (Johnson 1995: 219). After realizing the profound impact of homicide on the lives of young people in her community, she also understood the ways in which social marginalization and oppression create and sustain urban trauma. By connecting students’ real-life experience to classroom practices, she describes a healing process that integrates issues of power, history, self-identity, and the possibility of collective agency and struggle.

One of the undertheorized aspects of social capital is the conceptualization of hope and its impact on community, educational, and civic life among black youth. Kevin's experience detailed earlier illustrates the ways in which radical care departs from traditional ideas about care by placing a greater focus on the impact of trauma and the collective process required to heal from it. By focusing on relationships and dimensions of community change, radical care serves as an important community and social resource for youth. Care is facilitated by intergenerational advocacy that challenges negative concepts about black youth, is developed by building a collective racial and cultural identity, and is sustained by cultivating an understanding of personal challenges as political issues. Healthy relationships are fundamental prerequisites for radical care between youth and adults. If care is given meaning through relationships among individuals, then radical care is formed in community.

CONCLUSION: RADICAL HEALING IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

What does radical healing mean for public policy? How can educators and youth workers use a radical-healing process? What practices can reshape how we work with black youth? Policymakers, educators, and youth workers must consider not only the short-term strategies that focus on preventing problems among black youth, but they also must embrace a long-term emancipatory vision that supports civic and political engagement among black youth. An emancipatory vision for black youth involves three steps: (1) shifting policies from focusing on problems to focusing on possibilities, (2) investing in action strategies rather than fixing strategies, and (3) building cultural pathways to well-being for young African American males.

Shifting Policies from Focusing on Problems to Focusing on Possibilities

Rather than concentrating on what behaviors we want to eliminate or reduce among black youth, we need to focus on what type of world we want to see. This might mean envisioning a society with racial and gender equality or imagining a community with a vibrant economy. The key is that we must have a vision of our society to articulate a vision for youth. Both visions are inextricably linked. Social scientists have been so constrained by the focus on solving problems that we have lost the ability to create new

policies, programs, and strategies that enhance behavioral assets, values, and social capital among black young men.

Articulating a new vision for black youth not only provides clear direction, but it is inspiring, life-affirming, and uplifting. There is something powerful about our capacity to create rather than our ability to destroy. Perhaps just as important as the political organizing during the 1960s was a common vision for equality and justice. Activists' collective goal was not simply to end segregation; they sought to create a just society. Black youth and their allies endured the brutal violence that resulted from sitting-in at lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina, or marching in Selma, Alabama, because of a commitment to a common vision for society.

If we listen closely, we can hear the ways in which today's black youth are articulating a fresh vision for society. Conversations among black youth in barbershops, at parks, and on street corners not only highlight how things are but also how things should be. The scholar and activist Makani Themba (1999) has reminded us that when oppressed communities have conversations about how the world should be, they often talk out of earshot of dominant society. For oppressed communities, these conversations validate what people experience every day and create a collective consciousness about how things should be. Historian Robin Kelley (2002) has explored the role of black radical imagination in black social movements throughout history. He argues that "progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors, and more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way" (Kelley 2002: 9).

One place to learn how black youth envision social change is through hip-hop culture. Despite the fact that some of hip-hop culture is commercialized, contradictory, and sometime even retrograde, this art form does enable us to learn how black youth envision society. To understand this vision, however, we have to look beyond music lyrics and videos. Hip-hop scholar Jeff Chang (2005) has chronicled how New York City's economic decline and layoffs in the public schools during the 1970s gave rise to hip hop. In response to years of gross disinvestment in New York's low-income communities, youth formed networks of break dance clubs, DJ crews, and neighborhood hip-hop block parties that encouraged youth from neighborhoods that were once at war with each other to come together and compete

through dancing or rapping. This activity ultimately served to mitigate violence in the Bronx and provided limited economic opportunities for local hip-hop artists.

Similarly, the late scholar and activist Lisa Sullivan (1997) argued that in the absence of traditional participatory opportunities—including student government, community review boards, and youth volunteering—some black youths participate in an intricate network of relationships among hip-hop artists, party promoters, filmmakers, and youthful hip-hop clubs that provide black youth with tangible organizing skills. More recently, the journalist Bakari Kitwana (2002) has discussed how the proliferation of new hip-hop political organizations (such as Hip-Hop Summit Action Network [HSAN] or the National Hip-Hop Political Convention in 2004) seek to garner the resources and energy of the hip-hop generation to build a common political platform relevant to the needs of millions of poor and working-class youth and young adults.

These efforts point to the ways in which black youth articulate a political vision for the communities in which they live. Hip-hop culture is forging a new paradigm by which to conceptualize social organization among black youth in urban America. Through music and culture, black youth and young people throughout the country are expressing their growing frustration with the inability of after-school programs and social services to confront the oppressive conditions in urban communities.

Investing in Action Strategies Rather Than Fixing Strategies

African American youth are not passive victims of social neglect. Rather, many find remarkable ways to struggle collectively to improve the quality of their lives. We must prepare African American youth to confront inequality in their schools, communities, and society. For educators, youth workers, and policy advocates, this means shifting from a “fixing” perspective to an “action” perspective. We must consider simultaneously how structural inequality shapes young people’s lives while at the same time prepare youth to contest, challenge, respond to, and negotiate the use and misuse of power. Despite the tremendous challenges that young people experience in urban environments, good support and guidance can help them respond in ways that further their development and contribute to vibrant community life. The action perspective requires that youth understand how the misuse of power in institutions like their schools makes their lives more difficult. One might ask, Who has the power to influence the

quality of your education? Such analysis of power often reveals hidden systems of privilege and encourages critical thinking about social problems.

Preparing youth to confront power inequality develops their capacity to address school and community issues that do not meet their needs. This process rejects blaming young people for school and community problems. Rather, young people strategize, research, and act to change school policies, state legislation, and police protocols that create and sustain inequality. Systemic change focuses on root causes of social problems and makes explicit the complex ways that various forms of oppression work together. This helps counter the low self-esteem that comes from being blamed for one's own oppression.

Action in response to injustice can contribute to the well-being and mental health of African American youth. Although this is not a new idea, it opens some interesting opportunities for further research in this area. Coauthors Roderick Watts and Omar Guessous (2006) have offered a social-psychological discussion about the sociopolitical development of youth and the role of social oppression. Their study surveyed 131 youths about their capacity to change things they believed to be unfair. They found that black youth who displayed a strong belief that they could change things also displayed higher levels of mental health and youth-development outcomes.

Developing an action perspective involves teaching youth about the root causes of a particular community or social problem and supporting them with ways to address the problem. It entails transforming a problem into an issue and identifying parties responsible for bringing about desired changes. The action perspective also builds important cognitive skills that allow youth to develop meaningful and innovative solutions to school and community issues. In addition to critical thinking, relationship building, and identity development, the action perspective makes youth issues central to overall community-change efforts. This process broadens young people's understanding of power and how institutions affect their lives.

One example of an action strategy with black youth has been used among teachers. Teachers have developed surveys to document young people's perceptions of their school and the quality of their education (Cammarota and Fine 2008). Having students respond to key questions—Were you given books for all your major subjects this year? Where do you feel safe at your high school? What would you do to improve the lunchroom?—can provide them with insight about how other students may feel the same way about their school and share similar educational experiences.

After analyzing the surveys, youth may learn that safety is a primary concern at their school. This information could be used to build important

analytical skills, including critical thinking; consensus and relationship building; and how to negotiate, compromise, and navigate bureaucratic institutions. This type of action research also involves recruiting allies and members and educating the general public about safety at school. Action involves a wide range of activities: possibly speaking at a city council meeting, informational picketing, writing letters, organizing petition drives, displaying banners, and conducting walk-outs. Some forms of action are more subtle. Building optimism, hope, and the belief that youth can change things is an important form of action and also important political currency. More than simply creating a ruckus and getting media attention through organizing, action involves modeling the vision and living and treating each other with compassion and justice.

Action provides pathways for finding young people's life purpose and experiences that can help shape their sociopolitical identities well into adulthood. Often such experiences translate to new worldviews about social issues where young people see their communities as a place of possibilities and change. For example, researchers Miranda Yates and James Youniss (1998) found in their yearlong study that black youth who participated in civic and/or political activities developed a greater understanding of social justice and civic responsibility over time. Action thus connects the personal with the political because it removes self-blame and helps young people see the connections between personal life challenges and broader social issues.

Building Cultural Pathways to Well-being for Young African American Males

Culture and identity provide black youth with purpose that is both rooted in the history of black struggle and connected to problems in everyday life. Scholar Peter Murrell (1993) has made this point by suggesting that Africans in the United States historically viewed education and literacy as an act of freedom in post-Emancipation America. He suggests that "Africans in America continue to struggle against institutionalized inequality, which makes our heritage of literacy very different from that of the mainstream American culture. . . . [Out] of a history of disenfranchisement and denial of access to education, the Africanist cultural value emerged—literacy as the practice of emancipation" (Murrell 1993: 30–31). Murrell suggests that freedom, liberation, and justice are values rooted in African culture and can guide pedagogical practices. The challenge is to build a cultural consciousness among black youth that can interrogate issues in everyday life. To accomplish this, we must grapple with such questions as how culture

encourages black youth to confront police brutality. How can African cultural identity encourage black youth to organize to gain access to culturally appropriate books and school materials?

Those of us who work closely with African American youth should constantly question and challenge approaches that cannot confront these difficult questions. However, this work requires that we make difficult choices about our own lives. Effective work with African American youth requires more than simply following step-by-step recipes for success. The conditions in which black youth find themselves did not come about from a simple three-step recipe, so we should not expect simple solutions to difficult problems. Effectively working with African American youth requires a commitment to justice and a vision for freedom. No graduate course, training program, or book can adequately provide this type of commitment. However, if we dedicate ourselves to the relentless pursuit of love, peace, and justice, perhaps we can achieve a better quality of life for young people, ourselves, and U.S. society.

NOTE

1. Sward, "High Black Arrest Rate Raises Call for Inquiry," A1–A6.

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