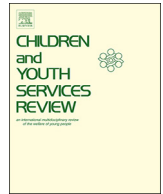




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## Discussion

# Training youth program staff on the importance of cultural responsiveness and humility: Current status and future directions in professional development

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## ABSTRACT

Youth programs play an integral role in fostering positive youth development; therefore, it is important to ensure the youth program staff are well-trained to deliver high-quality programming. Professional development of youth program staff often includes training on the diversity among youth and their families as well as within their communities. However, a review of the literature on youth program staff professional development indicated very few training programs that teach staff how to integrate the cultural assets, beliefs, and values of youth and their families. Recent literature has suggested that education on diversity and equality is not sufficient to yield culturally responsive and humble direct service providers, such as youth program staff. This paper reviews the importance of culture in positive youth development, youth programs, and professional development of staff. Recommendations on how best to integrate cultural responsiveness and humility in professional development of youth program staff is discussed.

High-quality youth programs are those that partner with youth and their families to enhance positive and minimize negative outcomes. To achieve the best possible youth outcomes, high-quality programs require competent youth program staff. Among youth programs in the United States, meeting the professional development (i.e., any experiences that improve youth program staff's knowledge and skills to execute their duties and tasks in a youth program) needs of youth program staff is a challenge due to a myriad of factors such as limited resources, increases in expectations of skills and knowledge of youth program staff, and difficulties managing youth program staff's competing priorities (Garst et al., 2014). To develop professionally, youth program staff participate in numerous opportunities that cover diverse content across a variety of delivery methods (e.g., Evans, Sicafuse, Killian, Davidson, & Loesch-Griffin, 2009; Quinn, 2004). It is important that professional development for youth program staff incorporate content that teaches them how to identify and celebrate cultural diversity within youth programs in order to foster connections despite differences. Equally as important, professional development opportunities must also teach youth program staff how to integrate the cultural values, assets, and beliefs of youth and their families into programming and activities in order to yield the best outcomes for youth.

Currently, many professional development opportunities teach youth program staff how to acknowledge and respect diversity (e.g.,

how to create a bias-free or an inclusive environment Vance, 2010); however, there is less emphasis on how cultural values and characteristics should inform content and delivery of youth program activities. To meet the training needs of youth program staff, professional development training must address both how to incorporate cultural values of youth and their families as well as the importance of valuing cultural diversity. Therefore, the goal of this paper is twofold: to review how culture is reflected in positive youth development models, American-based youth programs, and youth outcomes and to offer recommendations on how to further extend content that strengthens cultural responsiveness and humility within an American context in youth program staff's professional development.

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. Culture and human development

There are numerous factors that contribute to healthy functioning among children and adolescents (e.g., Lewallen, Hunt, Potts-Datema, Zaza, & Giles, 2015). In the last several decades, researchers and practitioners have begun to study how to incorporate the role of culture in models of healthy human development (Constantine & Sue, 2006; Keller et al., 2006). In particular, García Coll et al. (1996) proposed a

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model where cultural assets in the form of traditions, cultural legacies, and racial and cultural socialization impact developmental outcomes such as cognitive and emotional competencies. In support of this model, for example, there is evidence that among diverse racial and ethnic youth, cultural socialization has been associated with scholastic competence (Richmond & Pittman, 2016), school engagement (Seol, Yoo, Lee, Park, & Kyeong, 2016), and prosocial behaviors (Knight, Carlo, Mahrer, & Davis, 2016). Therefore, practitioners who consider the cultural values and assets among racial and ethnic minority groups are able to support healthy functioning among children and youth. Furthermore, youth program staff who integrate cultural values common within families from diverse cultural backgrounds will likely have programming that best fit the needs of the youth and their families (e.g., Brittan Loyd & Williams, 2017). As models of human development have evolved, positive youth development theories emerged as a way to examine the variables that underscore the assets and strengths of youth (Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). Moreover, since positive youth development theories assume that interacting processes have a bilateral influence on development throughout the lifespan, cultural factors such as beliefs and values can be easily integrated into theories of positive youth development.

### 1.2. Positive youth development theory

Positive youth development is grounded in developmental systems theory which aims to explain how interactions among individuals and the contexts within their environment contribute to individuals' growth, learning, and change throughout the life span (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011). A well-cited example of a developmental system theory is Bronfenbrenner and colleagues' (1977; 2006) bioecological theory of human development. In this theory, there are four systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem) that interact and contribute to human development. Positive youth development can be said to be a direct product of the microsystem (the relationships between youth and family, peers, mentors, and other important individuals) and the mesosystem (the interactions among the various components and settings within youth's lives) and an indirect product of the exosystem (the social structures that impact youth's environment) and macrosystem (the overall culture of the society as expressed by the economic, educational, political, legal, and social systems; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For youth who attend youth programs, youth workers are part of their microsystem, while youth programs are within their mesosystem; therefore, both are important pieces to their overall development and well-being.

### 1.3. Culture and positive youth development

Positive youth development occurs, in part, due to a combination of multiple resources within youth's social, emotional, physical, academic, and interpersonal environments that allow them to succeed (Geldhof et al., 2015; Larson, 2011). There are numerous theoretical and empirical studies that suggest cultural variables (e.g., race, ethnicity, immigrant status) may influence what constitutes positive youth development for youth and their families (e.g., Lateef & Anthony, 2018; Williams & Deutsch, 2016). As such, the meaning of culture and how it is defined in the context of healthy functioning are important considerations within the field of positive youth development. For this review, the word culture is defined as "the embodiment of a worldview through learned and transmitted beliefs, values, and practices, including religious and spiritual traditions. It [culture] also encompasses a way of living informed by the historical, economic, ecological, and political forces on a group" (American Psychological Association, 2002, p. 8). Although not always explicitly discussed, application of cultural variables can be easily integrated into theories of positive youth development as either intrapersonal, familial, or environmental factors that impact youth's overall behaviors and experiences. To illustrate this

point, two commonly cited frameworks on positive development are reviewed in subsequent sections with an emphasis on youth's and families' cultural variables and experiences.

### 1.4. Five Cs model

The five Cs model (R. Lerner, 2009; R. Lerner et al., 2003; J. Lerner et al., 2003) of positive youth development proposes five characteristics that describe primary attributes of youth who thrive in their environment. The "five Cs" are competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring and represent traits that indicate positive development across multiple domains (R. Lerner, 2009). This model proposes that youth's strengths (e.g., prosocial behaviors) and environmental assets (e.g., youth programs) contribute to their positive development (i.e., "five Cs") and, as a result, decrease the likelihood of maladaptive behaviors. The development of the "five Cs" is a result of frequent and consistent interactions with positive adults, peers, and structures within the environment. Youth who develop the "five Cs" are thriving and, across adolescence, will acquire competencies that lead to the sixth "C:" contribution, which refers to positive contributions to self (e.g., maintaining good health, developing a career) and to family, peers, community, and societal institutions (R. Lerner, 2009). Culture can play a significant role in how each of the six Cs are defined, which ones are most valued, and how they are expressed within a family and community. For example, *familism*, a concept that emphasizes maintaining close family relationships and is a prominent feature of many Latino families, has been found to be positively related to prosocial behaviors (e.g., adaptive moral reasoning, helpfulness, etc.) among adolescents (Knight, Carlo, Basilio, & Jacobson, 2015). Further, an emphasis on *familism* can have positive implications for how Latino families might offer support to individual family members in distress (e.g., Stein, Gonzalez, Cupito, Kiang, & Supple, 2015).

### 1.5. Developmental assets

Benson and colleagues (Benson, 2002; Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011) put forth the developmental assets model that is based on the premise that developmental assets are strength-based characteristics of youth and their environments (e.g., family, peers, and school) that increase the likelihood of positive outcomes in youth's lives. The model is divided into internal assets (e.g., positive identity and social competencies) and external assets (e.g., social support). Developmental assets are strengthened as a result of repeated positive contact with caring and responsible adults and peers in varied contexts; moreover, these exposures are reinforced by community networks and institutions (Benson, 2002). Developmental assets have been associated with increases in prosocial or "thriving" behaviors and decreases in risk behaviors (e.g., Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Cultural beliefs can have an important role in which developmental assets are emphasized in a family and community as well as how those assets manifest. For example, parents' cultural identity has been linked to parents' expectations of youth's independence and autonomy (Roche et al., 2014). In addition, culturally oriented interventions and programming have been associated with a reduction in maladaptive behaviors among ethnic minority youth (e.g., Lowe, Liang, Riggs, & Henson, 2012), suggesting that external assets that are strengthened by culturally based interventions can positively impact youth outcomes.

Culture not only has a substantial impact on how youth and their families function and develop, but also influences how youth and their families define positive youth development (Williams & Deutsch, 2016). Specifically, what constitutes healthy self-esteem, positive peer relationships, and positive identities may vary due to variations in what is valued by families and communities across different cultures (e.g., Grills et al., 2016; Thomas, Davidson, & McAdoo, 2008). For example, in models of positive youth development aimed at racial and ethnic minority youth, researchers have suggested to broadly define youth's

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