



Under-served and un-deserving: Youth empowerment programs, poverty discourses and subject formation



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ABSTRACT

Youth gardening empowerment organizations are growing in popularity as an urban model for youth-focused nonprofit work within the United States. These organizations aim towards progressive goals of poverty alleviation through holistic youth empowerment but encounter tensions between the imperatives of funders to distinguish (or discipline) youth in terms of performance and their own impulse to include all those in need. Despite benevolent mission statements, however, these organizations perpetuate long-standing poverty discourses that distinguish between deserving and undeserving poor subjects. I explore these tensions through fieldwork with Youth Grow, one such youth gardening empowerment organization in Seattle, Washington. I argue that residual poverty discourses persist due to the contradictory positioning of progressive organizations within a neoliberalized landscape of social service provisioning. This nexus, between donor dependence and cultural imaginaries about poverty, produces the mismatch between relational program goals and residual practices. I propose a more self-reflexive approach to programming that considers the subjective, lived experiences of youth participants in relation to the material and discursive frictions that create these tensions.

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1. Introduction

We are witnessing a unique moment for social service provisioning in cities across the United States. As states drastically cut their already-diminished social service budgets, many nonprofit organizations step in to provide a patchwork of direct services. However, there is also a growing group of organizations promoting alternative, more holistic approaches to poverty alleviation (Lahann and Reagan, 2011). Urban empowerment is touted as a means of helping marginalized communities through ideals of self-improvement, increased participation and self-advocacy (Scheyvens, 2009; Roy, P., 2010; Roy, A., 2010, 2012; Dingo, 2012). Such programs are increasingly directed at youth, following the long-standing belief that intervention at the transition to adulthood can help change the course of young people's lives (National Youth Empowerment Program, 2013; Hammett and Staeheli, 2011; Hammett and Staeheli, 2010; Skelton, 2010). Additionally, on the heels of a growing alternative food movement, the model for such youth empowerment is increasingly deployed through urban gardening programs (Pudup, 2008; Knigge, 2009).¹ Unlike international

development programs that approach empowerment through individualistic, economic means (Fernando, 1997; Nagar and Raju, 2003; Mirafteb, 2004), youth empowerment organizations often approach impoverishment from a relational perspective. They recognize that young people are marginalized across *multiple* social and economic factors: age, race, class, gender, ability, language spoken, mobility, education, etc. (Cope and Gilbert, 2001). As such, their individual level interventions incorporate awareness of structural inequality. Unlike many urban social services that only provide direct services, youth empowerment programs practice whole person² service provisioning. They emphasize participation in decision-making, self-confidence, self-advocacy and self-efficacy: traits believed to help youth navigate their position within unequal urban systems, eventually moving young people towards more stable and 'successful' lives (Morton and Montgomery, 2013). Despite this vision and philosophy, which attempts to address complex and relational conditions of youth marginalization, these very same empowerment programs adopt funding and evaluation discourses that see poverty as residual: symptomatic, individualized and depoliticized (Harriss, 2009).

This project explores youth gardening empowerment programs as sites of poverty governance to better understand the tensions between relational goals and residual practices. I distinguish these

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¹ Including, but not limited to: Boston (The Food Project), Minneapolis (Youth Farm and Market Project), St. Paul (Community Design Center of Minnesota), Bellingham (Youth Grown), Olympia (GRuB), Santa Cruz (Food What!), Berkeley (Berkeley Youth Initiatives H.E.A.T program), Austin (YouthLaunch), Brooklyn (Added Value), Durham (SEEDS), and of course, in Seattle (Youth Grow, a pseudonym).

² I use 'holistic' and 'whole-person' here synonymously. This model addresses poverty alleviation through long-term, skills-based assistance, rather than proximate services championed by the state, such as direct food aid, temporary housing or emergency medical assistance.

terms throughout my argument to signal conflicting understandings, explanations and approaches to poverty.³ Residual understandings ignore the structural factors that lead to impoverishment, such as raced, classed, gendered biases, stereotypes and inequalities. Instead, residual poverty knowledge frames poverty as caused by poor choices and a lack of personal responsibility. Relational understandings, on the other hand, recognize that impoverishment is not a result of individual faults, but rather an outcome of multiple factors: systemic inequalities that privilege particular bodies and places, the economic dispossession that accompanies capital accumulation, and the discursive framing of 'the poor' as a distinct social 'other' (Lawson, 2012; Harriss, 2009). Youth empowerment organizations are positioned within a national landscape of neoliberalized social service provision that shapes the localized discourses and material conditions for youth empowerment work in US cities. These organizations, though unique in their empowerment language, are but one example of a broader field of anti-poverty non-profit programs. Thus, I approach this work through two overlapping literatures: feminist geographers' critiques of neoliberalization (Larner, 2000; Cope and Gilbert, 2001; Jarosz and Lawson, 2002; Larner and Craig, 2005; Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Kingfisher, 2007; Dolhinow, 2005; Roy, 2010) and relational poverty studies (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001; Harriss, 2009; Hickey, 2009; Schram et al., 2010; Mosse, 2010; Lawson et al., 2008; Lawson, 2012). Feminist critiques of neoliberalization emphasize that there is no one uniform experience of neoliberalism. Rather, processes of neoliberalization are shaped through place, such as an urban youth organization where multiple actors and rationalities interweave. Relational poverty studies draws our attention to the ways poverty is constituted through material conditions and discursive framing of poor subjects. These processes inform poverty governance through formal and informal spaces, such as empowerment programs that address poverty alleviation. One approach to understand poverty governance has been through tracing poverty discourses. Specifically, relational poverty scholars trace the long-standing circulation of discourses that frame the poor as either deserving or undeserving. A relational, feminist approach to youth empowerment organizations makes visible how localized context leads to tensions between the progressive goals⁴ and the circulation of dominant poverty discourses.

Poverty governance and poverty discourses become localized in many spaces (Cope, 2001; Cope and Latcham, 2009), through explicitly disciplinary projects (Larner, 2000; Schram et al., 2010), by shaping neoliberal subjectivity (Rose, 1999; Brown, 2003; Newman and Clarke, 2009), and by informing the 'best practices' for nonprofit social service provisioning (Martin, 2004; McCann, 2004; Ward, 2006). Geographers have explored these operations, but through perspectives which do not adequately situate youth empowerment organizations in relation to the political economic and cultural landscape of progressive anti-poverty service provision. This existing work illustrates the uneven deployment of social services, either through welfare programs (Cope and Gilbert, 2001), the devolution of state resources to the shadow state (Trudeau and Cope, 2003), via participatory community development (Elwood, 2006), or through social movements' struggles (Leitner et al., 2007). Even as geographers address social service provisioning more broadly, youth empowerment organizations indicate a new model of anti-poverty programs that does not neatly fit any of these current literatures. These organizations warrant increased

³ A useful cross reference here is Byrne's (2005) *Social Exclusion*, which distinguishes between 'weak' and 'strong' explanations of exclusion, the former employing individualistic understandings, and the latter taking into account social context and marginalization.

⁴ I refer to *progressive goals* to signal organizational attention to relational poverty issues. This means that programs emphasize long-term solutions to poverty, rather than only providing proximate, direct services that meet immediate needs. These goals often involve skills-training, social support, and comprehensive programming.

attention, not only as new examples of social service provision, but as significant youth spaces, shaped by daily practices, discourses and relationships (Skelton and Valentine, 1997; Wridt, 1999, 2004; Hopkins, 2010). I extend this existing research by exploring the multiple rationalities, discourses and materialities that circulate through youth empowerment organizations. I analyze the discourses and practices that organizations undertake in the governance of poor subjects. What logics and limits interweave and influence this governance? How are programming practices actually experienced by program participants (i.e. poor subjects)? How do these lived experiences influence and impact participant subjectivities? What spaces exist, if any, for participants to articulate these experiences back to the organizations?

This paper draws on fieldwork with Youth Grow,⁵ a youth empowerment gardening program in Seattle, WA, in order to understand the ways in which these types of organizations intervene in the governance and lived experience of the marginalized populations they seek to serve. To explore the tensions between stated goals and lived experiences, I draw on participant observation of the organization as well as interviews with youth participants, program volunteers and staff. I begin with a review of feminist critiques of neoliberalization and relational poverty studies to trace geographers' engagements with neoliberal poverty governance, subjectivity formation and social service provisioning. I draw attention to the empirical and theoretical gaps that fail to adequately position youth empowerment programs within a society that holds particular values about poverty and aid. Next, I present a case study based on my work with Youth Grow. I explore my findings in two stages: the first sets up the structural and political economic position of Youth Grow vis-à-vis current neoliberal imperatives and constraints. The second highlights the ways in which youth participants experience neoliberal values and ideologies. Finally, I weave these components together to show that, despite benevolent intentions, long-standing discourses of deservingness continue to be mapped onto youth participants. The paper closes with reflections as to how youth empowerment organizations, by engaging in more relational self-reflexivity, may become more aware of their contradictory political economic and social positioning.

2. The rise of youth empowerment organizations

To fully understand the discursive and lived experiences of any social service organization, we must better understand the political, social and historical context in which that social provisioning takes place (Cope and Gilbert, 2001). In the case of youth empowerment organizations, this means recognizing their political economic position within a neoliberalized social service landscape, as well as the positions of the youth whom they seek to serve. Low-income urban youth experience heightened vulnerability following state retrenchment of services such as education and social work (Gaskell, 2008). They may feel increased pressure to supplement family incomes through their own work, even as competitive job markets and increasing professionalization of the workforce shrink the likelihood of finding employment (Jeffrey, 2010). Youth empowerment organizations intervene in this landscape: their mission statements reflecting a desire to mitigate young people's material conditions of poverty, and their program goals reflecting a relational rather than residual understanding of poverty. And yet, facing structural constraints, empowerment organizations implement governance practices that follow century-old ideologies and discourses of dominant poverty knowledge, which see poverty as an individual's responsibility as well as their imperative to 'fix' (Staeheli, 2012).

⁵ All names have been changed to protect identity and confidentiality.

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