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Creating New Leaders: Youth Activism in South Africa

This paper asks what happens when South African black youth¹ become community activists. The number of development and social outreach programs for at-risk youth, particularly in a country like South Africa, which is struggling with the ramifications of its past and nascent democracy, are seemingly infinite. Programs that train and support youth in community activism, however, are quite different in their methods and outcomes. In undertaking this research project, I was driven by the desire to understand better the potential consequences of involving young people in community activism projects that do not just address social problems, but actively recruit youth to take leadership roles in combating these challenges. I hypothesized that involving youth in such activism would both reduce their participation in violent crime and increase their self-identification as leaders. In particular, I was interested in the ways that community activism projects incorporating youth leadership tactics differ from what I might call the “band-aid” approach of many (though certainly not all) NGOs. Such projects often provide support in the form of after-school care, health services, vocational training, etc. to young people. While these are worthwhile endeavors, they often lack the self-sustaining drive inherent in other projects that actually create new community leaders from within. Thus, I ask specifically about the goals and outcomes of projects that train youth to lead within their own local contexts.

My focus, however, is not so much on the effects youth activism has on the larger community as on the internal effects such work has on young peoples’ self-identification and the choices they make in their daily lives. Does becoming an activist change or shape

a young person's sense of self? Does such involvement lead to shifts in youths' daily activities and choices? How do youth respond to NGO methods that encourage activism? How is self-identity as a leader shaped, and what are the major influences for such a self-perception? I will first outline some of the previous studies focusing on youth identity, citizenship, and violence in order to show connections between these topics. I will then move on to two case studies conducted in South Africa during 2009 that involved NGO interventions working with youth in both an urban and a rural community.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Until recently there has been a conspicuous absence of youth as its own category in anthropological literature. Bucholtz (2002) addressed this issue:

Despite a vast literature on youth cultures spanning many decades and disciplines, surprisingly little of this research was informed by anthropology until very recently...Research has usually approached adolescence from the perspective of adulthood, downplaying youth-centered interaction and cultural production in favor of an emphasis on the transition to adulthood. Thus anthropology concerned itself not primarily with youth as a cultural category, but with adolescence as a biological and psychological stage of human development. (525)

Furthermore, theorists have addressed a dearth of discussion on young Africans in particular; this demographic remains greatly under-represented in the literature on Africa (de Waal and Argenti 2002, 123). Through this paper, I attempt to promote dialogue on this topic as well as to connect and clarify debates around the central themes of youth identity, citizenship, and violence.

What does it mean to use the label "youth," however? The category of youth, and by extension, childhood, is an elusive one to define and varies greatly across cultures. Definitions of what constitutes childhood are largely shaped by the historical moment

within which they are embedded (Cole and Durham 2008). Most theorists conceptualize childhood as a specific outcome of modernity and industrialization, during which new ideas about education and development took shape (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005, 19-20). In the Comaroffs' explanation, youth as a separate and unique category and life stage arose during a period of increased industrialization and revolution that resulted in the birth of the nation-state throughout Europe. Young people became a site of citizen development—a demographic to be educated and trained in order to reproduce the state—as well as “the creatures of our nightmares” in their power of revolt, upheaval, and unfulfilled hopes.

For the purpose of this study, I defined youth as those from age thirteen to eighteen—a notable contrast to the South African definition of youth.² I have focused specifically on these years because I see them as formative in shaping values and perspectives. As Cole and Durham (2008) explained, youth are “active agents who create cultural forms in the here and now that are worthy of scholarly attention” (21). They go on to specify the ways in which it is important both to see youth as a separate category from adults, and to note the temporality of this group as they age into the next generation of adults. In other words, I use their position on youth within this paper, as I am both interested in a bounded sense of the category of “youth” as well as how young people exist within and interact with the larger community of adults in various ways.

The shifting category of “citizen” in South Africa in recent decades demands attention in order to understand youths' position in post-Apartheid society. While previously denying basic rights of citizenry to non-whites (freedom of speech, freedom of movement, ability to vote for political representatives, etc.), the liberal constitution of the

new South Africa embraces the concept of equal rights for all. While non-whites are quite obviously considered citizens in the official sense post-1994, it is debatable whether or not they truly have access to the rights that might allow them to act as citizens of the state.

Durham (2002) discussed the contradictory and problematic nature of the concept of citizenship:

Citizenship is one of the most vexing problems in Africa, and indeed around the world, today... Too often... the problem of citizenship is reduced to an analysis of normative identity and its consequences: the necessity to conform to specific nation-ised identities, the difficulties of failure to conform. (140)

Thus, whenever we examine the notion of citizenship, we must ask the question—“Whose version of citizen are we dealing with?” (Durham 2002, 140). In the case of black youth in South Africa, the multiple and often contradictory spheres in which they reside can obfuscate any clear notion of what it means to be a citizen in this country. Moreover, we must challenge the notion that citizenship in the larger nation is always a desired goal; what happens when the nation does not represent the majority of its people?

Beyond the former Dutch and British colonization of South Africa, we can examine the Apartheid government as a type of internal colonialism, whereby the minority dominated and oppressed the masses in order to control both natural and labor resources (Werbner and Ranger 1996, 11). How is this particular context relevant to the case of youth activism? Within a postcolonial, post-Apartheid state, youth find themselves playing dual roles: that of subject and that of engaged citizen (Werbner 2002, 1). South African youth in the current historical moment are born into a unique situation, one in which they have both ever-shifting possibilities as citizens of a nascent democracy,

as well as constraints and barriers from the pre-existing conditions of the previous regime. It is essential that we take these multiple positions into account when we look at the case of youth involvement in community projects.

Cruise O'Brien (1996) discussed the parents of today's African youth as a possible lost generation.

It has been convincingly argued that the marginalized youth of postcolonial Africa in general have an unpromising political role. On the one hand, they are a natural opposition, having so little to lose and being so resentful of a situation in which they are left to get by as best they may. On the other hand, however, these young people are very poorly equipped to make their opposition effective: with their limited resources, they are easily manipulated by their elders. (55)

Though this is an extremely broad categorization that lumps together many ethnicities and cultures, it is informative in that it places postcolonial African youth in a dichotomous position: they are at once pushed to the brink of revolution by their political marginalization, and yet, at the same time, they are unable effectively to resist the status quo. Although the label "lost generation" has been used for the children born immediately following the end of Apartheid, it is reasonable to imagine that similar issues have influenced today's youth. My examination of youths' roles in community activism, then, questions such positions and proposes that, in fact, youth are quite capable of revolutionary acts—even from the margins of society (de Waal and Argenti 2002, 133).

Studies of violence point to the ways in which it functions as a creative outlet, particularly for marginalized youth. Although violence is often categorized as oppositional to youth empowerment, we may stretch our understanding of violence to see

the way it can function as a creative, meaningful act for those involved. Argenti (2002) stated that

young people very often do not simply reproduce state violence—even when they might seem to a casual observer to be doing so—but rather find ways of appropriating and subverting it. We must see young people not just as victims of the misfortunes of Africa over recent decades, but as a powerful force for change. (134)

This idea, that young people do not just reproduce violence, but actually reappropriate it in new and powerful ways, is critical in understanding the types of activities in which South African youth are involved today.

Looking at the case of Apartheid-era resistance in South Africa, we see examples of the use of violence as political expression and emotional outlet. Thus, it is relevant to question not just why violence exists, but also how it might have meaningful effects within communities; this could certainly be argued for youth resistance during the Apartheid era (e.g., Bozzoli 2004). In this paper I go a step further to suggest that violence can not only be closely related to more socially acceptable endeavors such as community activism, but can even function as a type of framework upon which to map new creative possibilities.

When discussing the topic of youth violence, Durham (2000) posed the question: “Are youth victims or perpetrators of violence?” (117). We see how this relates clearly to the case of South Africa, as a good deal of Apartheid resistance and protests were made up of youth who occupied identities of victims as well as perpetrators of violence—specifically, violence within the structure of institutionalized racism, resistance, and the call for revolution. Indeed, Argenti (2002) explained that in Africa today, “two stereotypes have thus simultaneously emerged, one portraying youth as ‘heroes,’ the

other as ‘villains’” (124). This multifaceted conception of the dual roles of youth with respect to violence is critical in our understanding of youth involvement in community activism.

In South African townships, high rates of violent crime—particularly in the form of youth gangs—seem an unfortunate consequence of the transition from Apartheid. As Jensen (2008) discussed in his study of gangs in the Cape Flats,³ “it increasingly appeared as if crime and violence had become the unintended consequences of the transition: crime and violence animated a new political reality in which security dominated the political agenda” (1). In this reading of township violence, young people use gangs as structured forms of resistance to their otherwise powerless position in South African society. Furthermore, the pressure on youth to join gangs is due to the fact that there is “a simple imperative for navigating the streets of the townships” (79). In other words, gangs are not only modes of resistance but also pragmatic choices of everyday survival.

Through these diverging literatures on youth identity, citizenship, and violence, we see how previous theorists have positioned young people in oppositional roles as both active citizens of the state as well as threats to society through their potential for rebellion and upheaval. By connecting these disparate topics, I argue that these roles do *not* occupy radically different positions in society, but actually are connected in meaningful and significant ways.

Research Sites and Field Methods

This study was completed over the course of five weeks in South Africa in July and August of 2009. I spent the first half of the research period working with a group of

youth participants in the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust (ABF), which operates out of an office in downtown Cape Town and runs programs in the various nearby townships. Started in 1997 in memory of a young American researcher killed in Guguletu Township in an act of racial violence, the Foundation strives to keep youth off the streets and support their education through after-school programs, camps, sports activities, etc.⁴ During my research, I worked with the HIV/AIDS Peer Mentorship Program within the ABF, which trains teenagers aged thirteen to eighteen on the specifics of HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, and social ramifications so that they can become mentors in their communities and educate other youth. All of these young people are black South Africans from various ethnic backgrounds, and, based on observations and interactions, live in varying degrees of poverty. In the two weeks I spent with the ABF, I attended daily two-hour meetings of the HIV/AIDS Peer Mentorship Program and observed activities as well as participated as a volunteer. In addition, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each of the seven regular participants at the time and a few staff members.

The second half of my research was spent in a rural municipality in the Eastern Cape province, working with a project sponsored by the Sonke Gender Justice Network,⁵ which has offices in both Johannesburg and Cape Town. Again, all of the young people I worked with here (as well as staff in the Eastern Cape) were black South Africans, though in contrast to the Cape Town population they were not ethnically diverse; all of my subjects and colleagues in the rural area were Xhosa, this being their primary language and cultural identification.

As stated on their website, the primary mission of the Sonke Gender Justice Network is:

to address the social aspects of the HIV epidemic, with a particular focus on gender issues. Sonke Gender Justice's vision is a SADC⁶ region in which men, women, youth and children can enjoy equitable, healthy, and happy relationships that contribute to the development of a just and democratic society. To achieve this, the Sonke Gender Justice project works to build government, civil society and citizen capacity to achieve gender equality, prevent gender based violence and reduce the spread of HIV and the impact of AIDS. (2007)⁷

As part of these general goals, Sonke implemented a program in Eastern Cape during 2008 where staff members collaborated with a local HIV/AIDS support group called Siyakhanyisa, as well as with a staff member from the Silence Speaks project at the University of California, Berkeley,⁸ to create digital stories with a group of eight youth participants from local schools. Youth were selected with the help of their teachers as well as Siyakhanyisa staff, and were then trained in issues of gender equality, HIV/AIDS, and other social justice topics, as well as in the use of technology to assist in story creation. The resulting eight stories focus on challenges these youth have faced in their communities, with the goal of building both their own sense of self-esteem and leadership identification, as well as educating the broader public through screenings in local meetings, educational institutions, and on the Sonke website.⁹ The two- to four- minute stories include topics such as rape, death, and gender roles.

My goals with Sonke in Eastern Cape were twofold: 1) to conduct an assessment for the organization on the efficacy and results of the Digital Stories project among youth participants, as well as to pilot their use as educational tools in local classrooms; and 2) to collect data from participants about the experience for my own research. To achieve these goals, I conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews with the seven youth participants,¹⁰ as well as audio-recorded their reactions during a screening reception of the stories. Lastly, I traveled to local schools in the municipality with the stories, conducting lessons on

various social justice issues and implementing a project in which students were guided in drawing and writing their own one-page (non-digital) story. This type of participant observation was extremely effective in examining the issues of critical importance to youth from their own perspectives, as well as investigating the different ways in which leadership and activism can be encouraged with a “hands-on” approach.

Problems in Methodology

There were several possible flaws in the research design that need to be addressed. First, my study involved little in the way of a control population of students uninvolved in activist projects as a locus of comparison. This was simply the result of difficulties in both time and access to youth populations, particularly in the townships, where traveling beyond the bounds of organization-supervised activity can be physically dangerous and is highly discouraged for community outsiders. In the Eastern Cape, I did interview a few students uninvolved in Sonke programs, but again, time and access proved to be obstacles.

Second, it is possible that youth interviewed were responding based on perceived expectations. For instance, it is obvious to youth participants in activist projects that a goal is to make them into community leaders, so it is safe to assume they would expect a positive value placed on such answers to my questions. I worked to offset such biases by explaining to youth that interviews were confidential and also by asking the same question in multiple ways to get at their true perceptions of self.

Lastly, any observations I have made here on changes in violence and leadership identification are tentative, largely because this study did not include a wide range of

geographical and ethnic distribution throughout South Africa. It would be a very useful site for further research to see if these trends might be mirrored in the larger nation.

Background

The significant ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of South Africa make it both a complicated and fascinating locus for studying youth identity formation and the many influences that young people are confronted with on a daily basis. My two field sites differed in many ways, and I outline some of those differences here.

Guguletu, a township just outside of Cape Town in the Western Cape Province, is home to approximately 80,000 people, according to a 2001 census.¹¹ The Western Cape has a population of approximately 5.3 million, or 11% of the country's 49 million people.¹² Because of its relatively high population density and successful tourist industry, the province is currently experiencing ever-rising migration rates from other parts of the country.



Figure 1: Map of South Africa.

Africa.¹³

Around the provincial capital of Cape Town, there are numerous townships that were erected by the Apartheid government to house those categorized as Bantu (of African descent) when they were forcibly removed from their homes within the city limits to make way for white-only districts. Further census data demonstrate the challenges Guguletu township residents continue to face after the dismantling of Apartheid: only 22% of residents had completed grade twelve and about 51% were unemployed in 2001. Of those employed, 67% earned 1,600 ZAR (about US\$210) or less per month.

Though the Eastern Cape has similar population estimates at around 6.6 million, the demographics of this province differ greatly from that of the Western Cape. While Guguletu residents are diverse in ethnicity and often speak several languages, live in

government-built houses, and have running water and electricity within their dwellings, Eastern Cape residents are almost exclusively rural Xhosa farmers and herders.

In direct contrast to the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape province is currently experiencing a rapidly increasing population outflow to the more urban centers, such as Johannesburg. Thus family structure here differs markedly from in the townships, where fathers are often present or at least in close proximity because they can work in the nearby Central Business District (CBD) of Cape Town; in Eastern Cape there is a noticeable absence of middle-aged men, as many migrate as seasonal laborers. My focus on both an urban and a rural setting was a deliberate attempt to encompass a wide range of the challenges and influences South African black youth face today.

It is impossible to discuss the realities of youth in present-day South Africa without acknowledging the legacy of Apartheid and how it resonates in present local as well as national contexts. Apartheid, literally “apart-ness,” was a governmental regime that was based on the ideology that races should be kept apart in all facets of life. The National Party government adopted Apartheid in South Africa in 1948 (Clark and Worger 2004). It is important to recognize, however, that racist ideology was deeply entrenched in South African society long before this change in regime—indeed, the perspective of some historians has been that Apartheid merely codified what was already in practice across the nation.

Apartheid policy did not just separate the races, but gave them rights according to a hierarchical assessment of perceived superiority and inferiority. Blacks, or Natives as they were called under Apartheid, were systematically denied rights and their movement was severely restricted through the Pass System.¹⁴ Although a plethora of other restrictive

policies were enforced during the forty-six years Apartheid was in effect, one of the most brutally oppressive and protested acts was the Bantu Education Act (1953 Assembly Debates). The measure codified an education system separated by race, and furthermore focused on preparing black students specifically for vocational jobs and denying them access to higher education and white-collar job opportunities. This act is salient to my research, because the widespread changes to the education system during Apartheid still resonate in the country today.

Due to the relatively recent dismantling of the Apartheid regime (in 1994), the country is in the midst of dealing with the aftermath of segregation, inequality, violence, and massive poverty. Unlike many other urban sites throughout Africa, such conditions exist within extremely close proximity to white opulence and incredible wealth.¹⁵

According to a recent *New York Times* article, half of all South African students today never make it to twelfth grade. In particular, those in township or rural schools graduate with so few marketable skills that they “qualify for little but menial labor or the ranks of the jobless, fueling the nation’s daunting rates of unemployment and crime” (Dugger 2009). Although schools are no longer officially segregated by race, geography and socioeconomic status perpetuate unofficial divisions along racial lines.

Today many of Cape Town’s township schools struggle with chronic teacher absenteeism, drunkenness, and sexual abuse—challenges that exhaust those teachers who remain highly committed to their vocation—and many of Cape Town’s black children experience an education of humiliation and failure. (Besteman 2008, 72)

The long-term ramifications of Apartheid affect all the young people I observed and interviewed, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

How Activism Changes Daily Life

One of the major questions underpinning my research was whether or not involvement in community activism changes the daily activities of youth, and if so, what kinds of changes take place. (By daily activities, I refer to the normative daily life of most young, black South Africans: going to school, spending time with friends, doing chores at home, etc. Here I consider both legal and illegal activities: for many youth, gangsterism and drug use are everyday acts.) I focused specifically on the issue of youth violence and criminal activity in South Africa, and hypothesized that activism might lead to a reduction in such practices—particularly in high-crime areas such as the townships surrounding Cape Town.¹⁶ Out of the seven young people I interviewed in the ABF HIV/AIDS Peer Mentorship Program, five explicitly mentioned a decrease in either direct or indirect involvement in violence and/or illegal activity. This decrease occurred in multiple ways: through their physical removal from street activities after school, or through the gradual restructuring of values and life choices through program activities and teachings, or both.

Why Activism?

Motivations among youth for joining activist projects were diverse, though some general trends may be noticed. Through my research, I ascertained the following motivators for youth activism (in random order): 1) desire to avoid crime/violence (either as victimizer, victim, or both); 2) desire to help others; 3) desire to help oneself, either physically and/or intellectually; and 4) peer pressure.¹⁷ In many cases, youth attributed their involvement in activism to more than one of the above reasons. Some students came

to the program with the explicit desire of avoiding township violence. As one informant, Jane,¹⁸ explained, “I wanted to get from out of the community. The dangerous things happening, like crime.”¹⁹ Indeed, often a prime motivator for activist work among youth was the project’s ability to remove them from the realities of everyday township life.

Others joined activist projects with the explicit goal of building intellectual knowledge that would help them in various arenas of life. As Mandisa explained to me, “I joined this program because I wanted to know more about HIV and I wanted to know more about the puberty stage and what happens to me when I grow up.”²⁰ This particular aspect of my research reveals gaps in the South African public school curriculum; I found many instances in which students cited a dearth of discussion at school on HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention.²¹ Further along in the same conversation with Mandisa, she mentioned that before her involvement in the ABF, she

only knew that HIV is like, something that cannot be cured. But you know, I didn’t know anything about HIV....I have learned what happens to my body, the puberty stage, and like, information about HIV and AIDS. How do you get HIV? What can you do if you have HIV? And what can you do if you get AIDS? And also I know that HIV is different to AIDS.

Nkosana, a 17-year-old boy, echoed this sentiment, explaining that before he came to the program he believed that HIV was a “black people’s disease” and that learning about it could cause you to actually contract the disease.²² Siphso, a 15-year-old boy, also explained that

In my neighborhood there are people that have HIV and some have AIDS. So people spread rumors, you know, that if you touch anyone with HIV you will get HIV too, so I just needed to know. So when my friends told me ‘No, you can’t get HIV by that!’ I kind of said ‘Ah! They know more than I do about HIV! So why can’t I join Amy Biehl?’²³

This statement illustrates the powerful influence peers have on youth ideas about HIV/AIDS, and the ways that activist projects can aid in correcting factual errors that may lead to life-saving practices. Indeed, Sipho went on to mention many of the gaps in his prior knowledge of HIV, saying he thought that “when you talk to someone with HIV you have it, when you touch someone you have it...I was kind of afraid, like, even our parents said ‘Don’t go to that house, there is HIV there.’ So we didn’t go there.” A key function of many community activist programs with youth is breaking down stereotypes and incorrect information on HIV/AIDS in order to change behavior and stop the propagation of dangerous misinformation.

In the rural area, Sonke’s Digital Stories youth participants cited similar motivations to participate in activism, despite the differences in setting and particular program activities. A key point of contrast in the selection process for Digital Stories was that it was more generated by teachers and administrators than it was by the actual youth participants. Although young people volunteered to participate, teachers in local schools then selected which students among those who were interested would actually go on to work with Sonke on a digital story. From my conversations with students, selection criteria were vague, though they seemed to focus on a combination of academic performance, leadership qualities, and English language ability.

A large part of the motivation in the Digital Stories work seemed to focus on the potential to reach a large, public audience with what youth considered critical challenges facing their community. As Thandiwe said to me,

It’s the fact that we’re changing people’s lives, and helping others who cannot voice out about what the pain they’re going through, that stuff, yeah...it’s something I’ve always been interested in...because most of the people there in the

community don't like to speak out to people, so I just wanted to show them a way to communicate with other people and see exactly what's happening.²⁴

Not surprisingly, the fame that can potentially come with a worldwide Internet feature seemed appealing to many of the teenagers as well. Paki mentioned both his desire to help people as well as his interest in being “on that spotlight”: “I wanted to be involved because I knew—in fact I know—I can change people’s lives. And in a way I’ve already changed people’s lives. So that’s that thing I always wanted. I always wanted to be on that spotlight.”²⁵ Probably because of the selection bias among teachers for the Digital Stories project, less youth involved here cited an initial interest in decreasing their involvement in other negatively perceived behaviors, such as violence and crime, because they mostly were not involved with such activities to begin with. While none of the rural informants mentioned a decrease in such behaviors as a goal, it did seem to be a byproduct of the experience for a few of the students.

Daily Life Transformations

Examples of major overhauls in the daily activities of youth activist participants are plentiful in my research. In Guguletu, of those youth that regularly attend school, most spend their free time either doing chores at home, hanging out on the streets, or going into Cape Town’s Central Business District to beg and steal. As George, the previously mentioned ABF staff member, explained:

You see, usually because of the poverty in the communities, they tend to go to areas where they can make money. So instead of begging in the community for money...the next best thing is to go into areas where it seems to be more wealthy...they’ll beg for a couple of hours and then before their parents come home they’ll hop on the next train back to the township...In my experience, I’ve found that kids aged between ten until say sixteen can earn up to 300 Rands (about US\$40) a day begging on the street...in some instances, we’ve actually found that

parents force the kids to go and make money...In most cases the parents will get money and just buy alcohol from that money. Which means the kids still stay hungry.²⁶

George bases his authority here on his prior experience working with “street children” in Cape Town doing social development work.

As stated earlier, five out of the seven youth participants that I interviewed in the HIV/AIDS peer mentorship program explicitly stated a decrease in their involvement in violence and/or criminal activity. One participant, Kim, said that if she were not doing the peer mentorship program she would be “sitting at home, chilling with my friends, or doing naughty things”—though she didn’t elaborate on what precisely “naughty things” entailed.²⁷ Nkosana also talked cryptically about his involvement in “bad things,” explaining that he used to hang out on the streets with his friends, and now he not only spends much less time on the streets, but so do almost all of his friends, because they have also joined the ABF program. He says that “for the things I have done before—I stopped them. I don’t have time for them.”²⁸ Other youth speculated on their own potential for violence and/or crime, and suggested that the program has kept them away from these life choices: “Many young people like me and others, even other ages, they are in gangsterism, you know, everything...smoking, doing drugs.”²⁹ When I asked Siphosiso if he thought he would be doing those things as well if not for the ABF, he responded that he thought so, “because I had a friend who wasn’t doing drugs. But then he left and he’s doing them...now he’s not here.”³⁰

Theorists have attributed the appeal of gangs in South Africa specifically to the post-Apartheid state. Jensen (2008), for example, explained how gangsterism provides an outlet through which to perform masculinity that has otherwise historically been taken

away from non-whites in the country. Importantly, little has changed on the ground post-Apartheid, as non-whites generally remain in positions of relative powerlessness in relation to the state.

To be a gangster was to be in control of your own life and ‘make women’ of the rest. Gangsters, discursively, turned the stereotypes upside down, and used the suffering, marginalization and extensive systems of incarceration as the media through which social maturity was achieved; they emerged as respected men through being ‘a bad mother fucker.’ (169)

Thus, young boys in the townships find ways through the gang to combat destructive stereotypes built upon institutionalized racism and oppression. In my research, youth routinely verified how the gang both lures them with riches, safety, and respect while at the same time constantly lurking as an ever-present danger that threatens to rob them of their futures.

Another youth, Nontle, also mentioned a decrease in illegal drug use:

In the morning I was washing. Then I went to my friends to smoke...ganja. Weed. I went to smoke weed. And then, sometimes we drink, on Saturdays we drink. And then I thought that, no, I could stop these things, this is not right for me. And then my friends in fact tell me to come here. And then I stopped everything.³¹

She related her drug use to an inevitable path to gangsterism, which she felt her new activist role had staved off: “[I saw myself] becoming a gangster. Because, um, when I haven’t got money to buy something, to smoke, I was going to steal or rob someone. Becoming like that, yeah. Dropping out of school because of smoking and drinking.” Notably, Nontle did not speak of a *desire* to join a gang in the future, but rather described this fate as an inevitable conclusion to her childhood. For many of the youth in the peer mentorship program, alternative options to a life of crime seemed impossible prior to their involvement.

But how is this specific to activist projects, and not just an effect of youth after-school programs in general? Wouldn't Nkosana stop his involvement in "bad things" simply as a result of any program that occupied time that would otherwise be spent on the streets? In some cases, decreases in violence and/or crime are a direct result of simply being off the streets. I argue, however, that activist roles are markedly different from other types of youth development programs in the ways they affect youths' daily choices. While certainly a big part of violence reduction may be tied to a decrease in free time, my research indicates a substantial change in overall attitude about violent and/or criminal activities; this seems to be a direct result of students' new role as community leaders and role models for other youth. While other programs might reduce violence during critical after-school hours, the Peer Mentorship participants cited repeatedly how they have reshaped their values as a result of this involvement—and have worked to spread these values to their peers and families. Thus, I tentatively conclude that youth activism programs have an exponential effect on the reduction of violence and crime, as they quickly expand beyond the original participants in ways that other programs cannot.

Self-Perception and Leadership Identity

In my research I observed that while every one of my subjects—in both programs—explicitly mentioned some form of community leadership activity since their involvement in activism,³² only about half of the youth participants I interviewed in Guguletu township actually consider themselves leaders. Here we see a noticeable disconnect between youth actions and self-perceptions. Why might this be the case?

Among the ABF participants, youth reported remarkable instances of community involvement and life-saving practices. Jane discussed her success in convincing friends to change their ways: “Some of them were using drugs and then some of them stopped using them...maybe if there’s someone that needs help from me, then I could help them.”³³ Despite this initial optimism, Jane later went on to say that she felt her community still faced huge problems and that it was hard to convince people to change because “some of the people get peer pressured from other people and then they won’t stop doing it.” Kim presented a much more optimistic attitude:

There was a problem with a teenager, so they asked me to help, saying “How can a pregnant mother who has HIV make sure her child is safe and will not have it?” I just said if the parent is HIV-positive and then she wants her child to be negative, she must go to her doctor and ask for medicine...a prevention for the baby for not getting the HIV virus.³⁴

Kim recommended the pregnant mother receive a particular type of antiretroviral treatment in order not to pass on the infection to her child during birth. Kim explained that the woman took her advice and was able to protect her baby, demonstrating the ability of young people to transmit life-saving health information on to the larger community.

Mandisa’s description of her involvement in the Peer Mentorship Program demonstrates the discrepancy between leadership actions and self-identification. She described helping people by imparting life-saving information about HIV/AIDS: “I help a lot of my friends at school. They ask me some questions about HIV...There was this group, like a group in my class, and we were participating about HIV and AIDS, so I just said, ‘No, leave it, I’m going to do it. Anything about HIV and AIDS...I’ll do that.’”³⁵ She went on to explain that she gives advice to community members about the epidemic.

“Other people, they do come to me and ask ... ‘What do you know about this?’ maybe someone’s going to say ‘I have sex with my girlfriend’ and want to know about HIV and how can that happen...I’m giving advice to the other people.” This is in stark contrast to how she described herself prior to joining the ABF, which is as a shy and insecure teenager, lacking basic HIV/AIDS prevention and transmission knowledge. “I only knew that HIV is, like, something that cannot be cured. But you know, I didn’t know anything about HIV....I didn’t have self-esteem. I was shy, I couldn’t stand in front of people...but now I can stand in front of people.”

In light of these descriptions of leadership activity, then, it is instructive that Mandisa later insisted she was not a leader herself. Although she claimed not to know the exact meaning of a leader, she described a hypothetical leader as someone who “leads the people” and teaches them to do the right thing. She identified her aunt as a leader, since she waited until her post-teenage years to become pregnant and is an independent and strong woman. So Mandisa saw leadership as a type of role model positioning, but stated, “I don’t know that I’m a role model to other people.” Though it is clear from her activities in her community that she has taken on a leadership role, it seems her self-identification has not caught up with these actions. This was the case among many of the peer educators.

It seems that much of this disparity between youth identification and actions relates to conceptions about adulthood and notions of respect in the townships. Specifically, boys repeatedly mentioned that in order to become respected men who might be considered leaders, they first needed to attend an initiation school. These schools involve sending boys of around seventeen to twenty years old to rural areas,

where they are ritually circumcised by traditional leaders and instilled with cultural conceptions of sex and masculinity. As Nkosana explained, at initiation schools they teach you “how to talk to people,” something he cited as necessary for being an effective leader. One of the ABF staff members discussed the idea that a boy returns from initiation school as a man: “When he comes back, everything is changed. You see, you talk with the boy, but when he goes to initiation school he’s a man. So a man must think for himself. He will think differently.”³⁶ My male subjects mentioned repeatedly that, despite their successes in influencing people to act differently in their communities, to truly become a leader capable of commanding respect and admiration, they would first need to go to initiation school. We can speculate, then, that this cultural belief affects youths’ choices in self-identification greatly, and has ramifications for the work that activist organizations do with them. Though further ethnographic investigation is needed to make any conclusions here, my own hypothesis is that local conceptions of gender and age hierarchy conflict with Western-oriented NGOs’ notions of leadership and empowerment.

Nkosana, however, did self-identify as a leader, describing himself as a reformed gangster who now uses the same qualities and social standing in a positive way to help his community.

Thing is I’m used to the townships, so I know how to start a conversation with the gangs. The teenagers...I want them to stop the things that we were doing. Because I hang around with them. I first will tell them ‘Friends, I stopped most of those things that you are doing...so now I want you guys to stop. And since most of you guys cannot come to Amy Biehl, I can give you some tips and I can teach you how to be safe.’³⁷

Here Nkosana presents himself as someone who is feared and respected by his peers, and therefore easily commands attention and authority as a community leader capable of changing values and actions. Jensen (2008) discussed the attraction to gang involvement:

First, gang narratives were saturated with the promises of infinite riches, fancy cars and free access to girls and sex. Second...the gang provided modes of identification that deferred the notion of the weak coloured man through the construct of the gang as a site for heroic identification and order, in opposition to the dominant society. (71)

In his description of his former illegal activities, Nkosana described how he wanted “a fancy life...to have more girls” and how his involvement in ABF has changed those desires. What is intriguing about his description, though, is that he used the framework of the strong hero that Jensen sees as central to gangster identity in his new role as activist: “The people [in my neighborhood] respect me...they are afraid of me, so they won’t say any bad things.” Thus, Nkosana incorporates his new activist identity into his pre-existing framework of social hierarchy within his community, attributing many of the same qualities of a successful gangster to what he sees as a successful activist. Many theorists have pointed to violence and criminal activity as a creative outlet for youth, and through examples such as Nkosana’s we see how such expression and skill-sets can be channeled into new types of agency with different goals.

In the Eastern Cape program, conversely, fully 100% of participants explicitly considered themselves community leaders. Lindiwe explained that although she already self-identified as a leader, the digital stories project amplified and strengthened this identification: “I think that I take control of things that happen in my life. I don’t let people, like, peer pressure and stuff to influence me in a bad way. So I think I’m a leader

because I can take decisions that I feel are right...I see the negative side and the positive side...So I can be the leader of myself.”³⁸

How, then, are these two program models different in their construction of youth identity? First of all, the digital stories project seemed to select youth who already identified as leaders—though it is unclear if this was an explicit criterion of the selection process. As Paki explained,

I think I’m a leader. Before I came here to Qumbu, at my secondary school I was head boy. And then I went to another school, Mthatha International. At Mthatha International I was a prefect. Here I was selected to be an RCL member [Representative Council Learner] ...Also my mother thinks ‘yo! Wherever you go, you are always selected to be something! I’m going to have a president [my child will be president when he grows up]!’³⁹

Young people like Lindiwe and Paki are certainly not the average Eastern Cape student—they are highly motivated students who have proven their capacity for academic success and leadership abilities throughout their childhoods. In contrast, the ABF opens its peer mentorship program to any youth in the area interested in joining, leading to a wider array of abilities and confidence levels.

There are ways, however, that the digital stories project emphasized and cultivated a sense of leadership among youth that ABF did not make a primary focus.⁴⁰ A major goal of the Eastern Cape program was to stress the idea of leadership and self-esteem—in fact, in many ways the primary focus in creating Digital Stories was to empower the storytellers, with the actual messages as secondary positive results. Youth participants explained this in their discussion of the Sonke-led workshops they attended prior to beginning the story-making process; Thandiwe said that they taught her about “thinking outside the box and living outside the box...not to follow the peer

pressure...and also always follow your heart, you do what's right, do not follow somebody else because they think it's right. Just know what's right."⁴¹ The workshops revolved around this "think outside of the box" mantra, which encouraged young people to pave their own paths as activists and leaders rather than blindly follow their peers. Thus, it is not surprising that, after these trainings, all the youth activists in the digital stories project self-identified as leaders.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown some of the potential outcomes of involving youth in community activism projects that address critical social problems and cultivate a sense of leadership identity among participants. I have pointed to a correlation between this activist work and decreased participation in violence and/or criminal activity within this demographic in South Africa. In fact, in most cases my subjects also demonstrated this decrease to be directly caused by their activist work as well. Furthermore, indicators strongly point to the possibility that projects which engage youth in social change help bolster self-identification as community leaders and—even where they may not explicitly consider themselves leaders—may lead to them disseminating life-saving information on issues such as HIV and AIDS prevention and treatment. It is clear to me that training and encouraging young people to become activists is an effective way to combat social problems from the inside, rather than simply leaving community outsiders with the task of mitigating the symptoms and after-effects of devastating realities such as the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa.

Beyond its ability to inform policy and development programs, my research offers a way to tie together seemingly unrelated bodies of literature in meaningful new ways. Through this paper, I have demonstrated the ties between previous theorizing on youth, citizenship, and violence and have suggested that we acknowledge the links between them. Through the framework of previous studies on youth culture and violence, as well as new sites of research with youth, we can read new possibilities for social change.

1 In this paper, I use the term black in accordance with its specific meaning in South Africa handed down from the Apartheid regime, in which the population was categorized as White, Black African, Coloured, Indian, or Asian. In South Africa, those labeled black (or Black African) have the darkest skin tone and belong to one of several ethnic groups. While these terms are fraught with problems in that they artificially categorize people based on historically justified racism, they have carried into the present day. I use them here as they are still used popularly in present-day South Africa – notably, by my research subjects among others.

2 According to the National Youth Act of 1996, youth are defined as 14-35 years. 2001. The Youth of South Africa: Selected Findings from Census '96. www.info.gov.za.

3 A geographical location outside the bounds of central Cape Town in which many townships are located. The Cape Flats are a result of the Group Areas Act of 1950, in which non-whites were forcibly removed from central Cape Town to contained areas along the city limits.

4 www.amybiehl.co.za

5 www.sonkegenderjustice.org.za.

6 South African Development Community, not in original.

⁷ www.sonkegenderjustice.org.za

⁸ www.silencespeaks.org

9 It is important to note here, however, that not all of this community engagement has yet occurred. Though stories are posted on the websites, minimal community screenings have taken place and little has been done to broadcast these stories within educational settings outside the initial community of origin. The potential of these stories as educational tools is great, and is a topic that I take up later in this paper.

10 Tragically, one youth participant was killed in a car accident before my arrival in the area. His story, however, remains on the website and I included it in my piloting of lessons with the Digital Stories project.

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- 11 2001 Population Census. City of Cape Town. www.capetown.gov.za. 2008.
- 12 2009 “Mid-Year Population Estimates.” Statistics South Africa.
- 13 2009 <http://www.sa-venues.com/maps/south-africa-provinces.htm>
- 14 Enacted under several pieces of legislation collectively referred to as Pass Laws, this system required all blacks to carry pass booklets stating their identification information as well as employment status wherever they went (1952 Assembly Debates).
- 15 Though it should be noted here that not all white South Africans are wealthy; nonetheless, the vast majority of whites are richer than almost all the country’s black residents. This is seen in statistics on education, housing, and other basic necessities divided by race (Community Survey, Statistics South Africa, 2007).
- 16 For instance, the website www.foreignpolicy.com, a division of the Washington Post, lists the city of Cape Town as having one of the world’s top five murder rates.
- 17 A more logistical – though no less important – motivator for some youth in the ABF programs was the daily presence of free snacks. According to one staff member, this bread-and-jam sandwich is the only food some children eat all day.
- 18 Names have been changed to protect identity.
- 19 Jane, youth participant, July 22, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 20 Mandisa, youth participant, July 23, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 21 It is helpful to keep in mind that youth perspectives and memories of course topics may contrast from what actually occurs in the classroom or what educators’ goals might be. Nonetheless, the noticeable perspective of youth that this topic is severely underrepresented in the curriculum is enough cause for concern on its own.
- 22 Nkosana, youth participant, July 27, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 23 Sipho, youth participant, July 27, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 24 Thandiwe, youth participant, August 5, 2009, Qumbu, South Africa.
- 25 Paki, youth participant, August 6, 2009, Qumbu, South Africa.
- 26 George, ABF Staff, July 28, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 27 Kim, youth participant, July 22, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 28 Nkosana, youth participant, July 27, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- ²⁹ Sipho, youth participant, July 27, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 30 Sipho, youth participant, July 27, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 31 Nontle, youth participant, July 27, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.

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- 32 I define leadership activity as any repetitive action(s) that guides the behaviors of others through authority roles.
- 33 Jane, youth participant, July 22, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 34 Kim, youth participant, July 22, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 35 Mandisa, youth participant, July 23, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 36 Anele, ABF Staff, July 23, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 37 Nkosana, youth participant, July 27, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 38 Lindiwe, youth participant, August 6, 2009, Qumbu, South Africa.
- 39 Paki, youth participant, August 6, 2009, Qumbu, South Africa.
- 40 This is certainly not for lack of interest. Rather, the importance of teaching township youth critical information about HIV/AIDS and training them to talk to peers is so time-consuming that it leaves little time for anything else. Nonetheless, the peer mentorship program does work on boosting self-esteem through activities such as poetry readings and class presentations – but again, they deal with a self-selecting group of youth that often have huge obstacles in their paths when they begin.
- 41 Thandiwe, youth participant, August 5, 2009, Qumbu, South Africa.

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