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Title

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Author

Young, Hanna

Publication Date

2021-11-29

Hanna Young
Spring 2021
Dr. Maharramli
CESC 191AX

Expanding Existing Empowerment Resources Designed for Young Men of Color to Support Young Women of Color - Literature Review, Community Engagement, and Program Analysis

Abstract

Mental health and experiences with trauma inform how people interact with the world around them and themselves. The Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI), located in Inglewood, California, is an organization devoted to supporting "youth and communities of color by empowering them to enact social change through research, training, and community mobilization," emphasizing the importance of system-level interventions. SJLI's current programs are designed to support young men of color — this community-engaged research project seeks to fill the gap and widen the scope of the organization's programming to young women of color. Literature reviews and analyses of existing programs designed to support young women of color have been conducted to collate perspectives and strategies for supporting young women; the community members will be included in these conversations. Supporting young women is critical to creating a more equitable and person-centered society, and this work will foundationally invest in promoting such change, specifically on the West coast, where research indicates a gap in programmatic supports.

Key Words: youth, young women, young women of color, young men, young men of color, BIPOC, leadership, women-led, education, advocacy, cultural appreciation, empowerment, gender, gender binary, inclusion, language, social change, interventions, mental health, trauma, intrapersonal interactions, interpersonal interactions, positionality, sensitivity, engagement

Problem Statement

This community-engaged research project, conducted over the Winter and Spring 2021 quarters at the University of California, Los Angeles, is centered on how to best provide mental health and trauma-informed supports to young women of color. This issue is socially significant because it implicates multiple different and critically relevant sectors. The intersection ultimately reflects the overall inaccessibility of healthcare, highlighting the fundamental barriers to care minority communities face and the inconsistencies in treatment availability. Relatedly, this issue calls attention to the mental health care disparities marginalized/minority communities experience. These disparities tend to manifest as treatment programs that are not easily adaptable and/or individualized, with most plans for treatment following a "one size fits all" model that disregards diversity and personal experience. Cultural insensitivity and ignorance in treatment programs, hospitalization discharge plans, and recovery trajectories are rampant. Further, clinician biases and treatment plans largely informed by white models of mental health experience significantly limits the efficacy and relevance of treatment — if it can even be accessed, that is (C. McCord Personal Interview, October 2020). The overall inaccessibility of mental health support also emphasizes the general lack of consideration for mental health issues as globally serious conditions that require care. Oftentimes, psychological disorders are discounted and incorrectly judged: these conditions are ones that go beyond emotion, "just being sad," or sensitivity. Additionally, this issue points to the nuances of language internalization and stigma.

When applied responsibly and consciously, community engaged research is the best option: it keeps the work from being sterile and out of touch and is vital to this project. Though broader implications of mental health are analyzed in this specific project, eating disorder

manifestation in communities of color is used as an example to highlight treatment disparities that people of color face. Because eating disorders are out of the realm of typical human survival mechanisms, and because eating disorders tend to be dismissed as disorders of vanity and egotism rather than legitimate psychological pain, people who have lived experiences with eating disorders can provide meaningful insight into support program development. Moreover, people with these lived experiences can help more fully inform how to mediate the more universal issues of mental health care, regarding treatment practices, insurance protocol, service accessibility, clinician/practitioner education, and related supports. Importantly, this research provides individuals who have been historically silenced a platform to share and control their narratives in their own voices, completely unmediated by anyone else. In this way, the project can also be used as a cathartic, healing space for individuals who choose to share.

With regard to enacting social engagement, I collaborated with the Social Justice Learning Institute to expand on my pre-existing community-engaged research on the intersection of community marginalization, food insecurity, and the manifestation of eating disorder pathologies, to investigate and address the larger inconsistencies and barriers communities of color face when accessing treatment and protecting their mental health. Specifically, I worked with the Social Justice Learning Institute to increase the scope of their existing support programs, which are designed for young men of color, to create support programs for young women of color. This community-engaged work considers and integrates lived experiences into treatment, recovery, and discharge practices, as well as to create a collaborative body of work where individuals can share their stories.

Literature Review

Okazaki's investigation (2009) of the impact of racism on ethnic minority mental health is centered on the following important inquiries: What is the biggest question in ethnic minority mental health research that should be solved by the field in the near future? What question will most advance the field? Okazaki asserts that identifying pathways to approach these questions is a critical part of the process of mediating them. Immediately, Okazaki makes it clear that "although scientific psychology has generated a large body of literature on racial prejudice, stereotypes, intergroup attitudes, and racial bias and their often implicit and automatic nature, relatively little is known about the effects of these subtle racial bias on minority individuals," highlighting the need for further exploration of the intersection between mental health and marginalization. Specifically, Okazaki emphasizes that community-specific issues and clinician biases, as well as internalized racism, through instances of microaggressions, implicit biases, and the like, meaningfully affect not only the ways that mental health disorders manifest in communities of color, but also affects and even limits the support they may receive. Throughout the analysis, Okazaki highlights the importance of forming "alliances" between classical psychological scientists and cultural psychological scientists (as well as other situationally-indicated field collaborations) to more fully inform how to proceed in supporting communities of color with care and respect, and insists on integrating communities into these discussions - the strategy that is the center of this research project.

In their research, Ward and Heidrich (2009) conducted interviews with 185 African American women, ages 25-85 to more fully understand their experiences, what they believe contributes to mental illness in their community, and their preferred coping strategies. Of the reported and recorded statistics, around 7.5 million African Americans are diagnosed with some

form of a mental health condition, but that 7.5 million others may also be struggling undiagnosed, with women specifically being more likely to go undiagnosed, unsupported, and untreated. Ward and Heidrich promptly note that even though many African American women struggle with their mental health, African American women very rarely utilize mental health services, with stigma being the most identifiable obstacle to accessing treatment. The authors find that participants believe that mental health issues can be mediated by treatment and personal motivation, and that, without formalized interventions, popular coping strategies tend to be centered on religion and family. This research is integral to my research project on the whole because it provides key insight into personal experiences and highlights the existing disparities in mental health care, both through the eyes of clinician/researchers and community members themselves.

Covington's research (2008) on the intersection of women and addiction through a trauma-informed lens considers how most addiction treatment has been developed with male patients in mind. Covington argues that male-directed and designed treatments for addiction will be largely unproductive for women seeking help because it fails to acknowledge important components of womens' lives that tend to be gender-specific, like the incidence of violence against them. Through this work, Covington highlights the need for gender-responsive services and Womens' Integrated Treatment Model (WIT), which incorporates relational-cultural theory, addiction theory, and trauma theory to create a comprehensive approach for supporting women living with addiction. On the whole, Covington identifies womens' exposure to violence, abuse, and aggression as an integral factor to the occurrence of addiction and subsequent treatment practices. This particular research is integral to my research project because it critically looks at

how to adapt and transform support systems that were originally designed with men in mind to translate to support systems designed with women in mind.

Ault's doctoral dissertation, "Queens Speak - A Youth Participatory Action Research Project: Exploring Critical Post-Traumatic Growth among Black Girls within the School to Prison Pipeline" (2017), not only explores youth participatory action research, but also engages community members through youth participatory action research to assess and create interventions for critical post traumatic growth among black girls within the school to prison pipeline. This study was conducted in a California high school, devoted to focusing on and supporting a group of young black women. In this work, Ault provides a comprehensive review of the methodologies and philosophies behind the study and its findings; "using photos, poetry, music and art young women presented their findings to educators and administrators; sharing their experiences within the school-to-prison pipeline, as well as their resistance and growth amidst harsh circumstances" (Ault 2017). Specifically, the photovoice strategy, "one of several qualitative methods utilized in community-based participatory research (CBPR)... is a participatory method that has community participants use photography, and stories about their photographs, to identify and represent issues of importance to them," has been increasingly utilized in health and social sector issue projects (Nykiforuk 2011). Photovoice, as a technique for community engagement, truly lends itself to facilitating conversation and agency among community members, emphasizing that community member participation in research is critical to making meaningful connections, ensuring that the direction of the research benefits community members, and that the research itself is driven by community members, not motives of community outsiders.

The contents of Ault's research also include an extensive literature review, recommendations for future research, and recommendation for school practices. Many personal skills were gained during this project, specifically "an understanding of their identity and history; a belief in their own power; a focus on their future; an interest in community activism; a desire to leave a legacy; and self-expression through the arts" (Ault 2017). One of the most foundational assertions that Ault makes is the following: " The YPAR approach and critical lens allowed us to consider the structural oppressions shaped by race and gender as we maintained a focus on first person narrative, and pushed each other to imagine transformational educational experiences for cis-gender, trans and gender non-conforming Black youth" (2017). Ultimately, Ault's aforementioned reflection highlights the importance not only of community engagement generally, but also the recognition and appreciation of individual identity in programming specifically. It is also critical to reflect on the saliency of Ault's dedication: "This dissertation is also dedicated to the Black children and young people who are not with us because of death, incarceration or exploitation. We failed you. You deserved better. May your stories be heard. May they motivate resistance and inspire change."

The following literature reflects information that will substantiate my primary example of the mental health disparities communities of color face to demonstrate the broader mental health care and empowerment program disparities. The work of Becker and Franco et. al. (2003) focuses on the influence that ethnicity and minority status have on access to eating disorder treatment. The results of this study show that both Latinx and Native American individuals who participated were considerably less likely than White participants to receive treatment recommendations or referrals and further evaluation or care. Ethnic minority groups were also found to be less inclined to seek treatment for an eating disorder, indicating that clinician bias

could be a meaningful impediment to treatment for eating disorders. This particular study substantiates the claims of my research, highlights that ethnicity and minority status contribute to the likelihood in which an individual will seek treatment. These contributions are crucially relevant to this work, as they emphasize just how multifaceted treatment disparities are; consistent marginalization impacts practitioner perceptions and individual perceptions of the self, both of which can and will impede successful and sufficient treatment.

The work of Becker and Middlemass et. al. (2017) details the relationship between food insecurity and the development of eating disorders. Important to my specific project, this research examines the manifestation of eating disorders among communities that are marginalized and access to meaningful nutrition. People in marginalized communities are not typically afforded the opportunity of being involved in this kind of research, and typically do not get to experience the benefits from the findings of such research. Because the individuals in these communities must continue to face the "postexperimental realities" of this research, making sure that they not only get to benefit from the research findings, but also inform the direction and applications of the research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 64; 2011).

Godart and Flament et. al (2002) investigate the comorbidity rates between eating disorders and anxiety disorders. In the context of this research project, it is especially important to pay attention to this interaction. I propose that the high comorbidity rate can be in part attributed to the fact that anxiety is generally present in communities experiencing food insecurities, result from monetary concerns, inconsistencies, and inequality, and the likely overall circumstantial, environmental, situational, and social discrimination that marginalized communities face.

Marques and Alegria et. al. (2011) compare the prevalence, correlates of impairment, and service utilization for people experiencing eating disorders across Latinx, Asian, and African American populations in the United States to non-Latinx White populations. The results of this study show that there is a higher lifetime prevalence of any binge related eating disorders among each of the participating ethnicities compared to the non-Latinx White participants, as well as reiterating the finding of another listed source, that service utilization, previously referred to as "help-seeking behaviors," were lower among the minority groups than the non-Latinx White participants. This study supports the notion that mental health/eating disorder practitioner training programs and eating disorder treatment programs are inherently biased, and need revision so that they are more accessible, and culturally aware and equitable.

Culbert, Racine, and Klump's (2015) research review provides information about sociocultural, psychological, and biological factors that contribute to the manifestation of eating disorders. This kind of information synthesis is especially useful to this research because it highlights cultural differences and/or disparities that could lead to the differing conceptions that result from engaging in eating disorders. This work is important because it emphasizes the variation in cultural conceptions of mental health, which is applicable to this particular research in a more global sense.

Summary

As aforementioned, when applied responsibly and consciously, community-engaged research keeps the work from being sterile and out of touch, and is vital to this project. This community engaged research focuses on understanding the discrepancies and barriers in mental health care, how people engage with mental health supports, and how mental health affects and/or impedes personal empowerment and academic achievement. Nina Wallerstein and Bonnie

Duran note that "by broadening and deepening the team of researchers to include those who are often simply "researched," we not only strengthen research processes but also contribute to more nuanced, complex, and authentic research outcomes, ultimately affirming the importance of integrating community members into research. In this way, research is not conducted around people, but, rather, with people (Wallerstein and Duran, 18; 2018). Additionally, Wallerstein and Duran confirm that "health disparities research is increasingly conducted within the framework of participatory research approaches," indicating why community-engaged research is indicated for a project like this one, as it is situated in the field of mental health and care disparities (Wallerstein and Duran, 18; 2018). This research aims to highlight and utilize methods that are fundamental to ensuring respect for participants and genuine, meaningful understanding of the knowledge accumulated through literature reviews, participant observation, interviews, program efficacy, and strategy analysis to contribute to eventual program development. Each research method employed in this project will help synthesize the knowledge accrued to generate more informed programs of mental health support for young women of color.

Methodology

Background

The Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI) is located in Inglewood, California and is "dedicated to improving the education, health, and well-being of youth and communities of color by empowering them to enact social change through research, training, and community mobilization." Each of SJLI's programs emphasizes different ways that young people can engage with the world and themselves to not only bolster their own intrapersonal relationship and power, but also to fortify their relationships with the world and promote social change. Specifically, SJLI encourages people to address system-level problems with system-level interventions, rather

than finding temporary solutions, by building "capacity for community members to identify and rectify injustice and to advocate for policies that address their needs." In this partnership, I liaised directly with Derek Steele, Assistant Director of Operations and Finance, and Angela Johnson-Peters, Associate Director of Programs and Development.

Making communication easy and strong facilitates meaningful relationships. Conversation and interaction are critically implicated in building relationships and creating substantial, systemic change: "Partners make clear and open communication an ongoing priority in the Partnership by striving to understand each other's needs and self-interests, and developing a common language" (CCPH Board of Directors). Due to the current status of the COVID-19 pandemic, the setting of this partnership was remote, conducted over Zoom and through email communication. Because we were unable to collaborate in person, one of my primary goals was ensuring that lines of communication were always open and that I was accessible.

My position in this project was directly related to conversation and interaction, and I am dedicated to being aware of what my presence in this space meant. This work is best executed collaboratively, standing on relationship-building and active engagement, as well as ensuring that historically silenced voices are not only heard, but also understood and appreciated. Because "a consideration of ethics needs to be a critical part of the substructure of the research process from the inception" of any project, acknowledging and integrating practices that ensure participants and communities are protected are fundamental to respectful work (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 59; 2011). As a young white woman who has been fortunate enough to have consistent access to education and has been able to continue and complete her undergraduate degree during a global pandemic, acknowledging my experiences in light of the community's experiences is vital. I have a personal responsibility to listen and respond with understanding, empathy, and practical,

individual-specific solutions. Exercising empathy and power with care and intentionality is vital to sharing space within the research world and knowledge. With that in mind, language and approach are also embroiled in this work. This project is about advocating with, empowering, and supporting communities, not "uplifting" or "enhancing" them. Words like "uplifting" and "enhancing" suggest inherent inferiority and are antithetical to the goals of this work; attributions like these are unfounded, incorrect, and insensitive. This work strives to provide people with a platform to be self-advocates and to thrive. As aforementioned, community-engaged work is best executed as the name indicates: in an engaged way. This work must be collaborative, and relies on relationship-building and active engagement. Again, ensuring that historically silenced voices are not only heard, but also understood and appreciated is fundamental to this work as a whole and to this specific research project.

Procedures for Data Collection

Rosa González's analytical tool, the Community Engagement Spectrum, will be applied to this work. Reflecting on positionality is also critical at this juncture. There must be a personal, "significant capacity to break-down systemic barriers to community participation," and acknowledging differing levels of marginalization and privilege is integral to collaboration and ensuring that hierarchies are dismantled and not perpetuated in this work (González). Because this work must be collaborative, conversation is fundamental. Data collection for this project cannot be rooted in question and answer interactions, but rather full conversations between community members and myself to reveal what the real community needs and desires are. Gonzalez ultimately stresses the importance of progressing from community engagement to ownership, empowering the community members to sustain the strides made by community

partnerships and continue to increase their own capacities and strengths, rather than relying on solutions that temporarily alleviate circumstances.

This partnership, project, and data collection originated within UCLA's Community Engagement and Social Change 100XP course, under Dr. Douglas Barrera, and culminated in Community Engagement and Social Change 191BX, under Dr. Bemmy Maharramli. Data collection was rooted in finding existing academic/empowerment programs for young women of color, discerning which strategies within these programs have proven to be most successful. This stage was rooted mostly in literature reviews and investigations of pre-existing programs. The literature reviews highlight the discrepancies in mental health care that communities of color experience, survey and assess trauma-informed therapies, and identify previous research that focuses on empowerment of young women of color. One main goal of this work was to build on existing research and find ways to integrate multiple successful empowerment strategies to not only bolster current supports for young women of color, but also to generate new programs that comprehensively unify individual empowerment strategies. Some of the pre-existing empowerment programs for young women of color identified for this research are the following: Black Girls Rock!, Sister Song, Black Girls Can, S.O.U.L. Sisters Leadership Collective, Pretty Brown Girl, and Gyrl Wonder. Each of these programs are led by BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) women. While learning about each of the identified programs, questions that guided the research were the following: What is the mission statement of the organization? Where is the organization located? Who (demographically) does the organization strive to support? What are specific areas of development that the organization focuses on? Who is the CEO/Executive Director? Is the organization led by individuals who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC)? Is the organization woman-led? What are examples of the

organization's work? Their success stories? Has the organization collaborated with any other

entities?

Procedures for Data Analysis

After completing my research on existing academic/empowerment programs for young

women of color, I collated the information and compared and contrasted the programs. The

criteria I focused on in my analysis were the following: What is the mission statement of the

organization? Where is the organization located? Who (demographically) does the organization

strive to support? What are specific areas of development that the organization focuses on? Who

is the CEO/Executive Director? Is the organization led by individuals who are Black, Indigenous,

or People of Color (BIPOC)? Is the organization woman-led? What are examples of the

organization's work? Their success stories? Has the organization collaborated with any other

entities? The literature reviews were utilized to support themes that came forward in the process

of comparing and contrasting pre-existing programs designed to support young women of color.

Analysis will inform how to move forward in supporting SJLI's growing community of young

women. Further, the literature review will contribute to the eventual development of support

programs for SJLI to integrate into their scope of community work. By identifying themes

consistent in the interviews and research that speaks to the experiences of communities of color

more broadly, considering both in context and conversation of each other will provide for a more

informed process of program development. Literature was shared with SJLI's community

members, so that they could provide input as to if my research and findings apply to this specific

realm of program development.

Results

  This research relied mainly on reviewing existing empowerment programs that were successfully supporting young women of color, investigating program websites, curriculum plans, activities of focus, administrative roles and administrators, and program goals. The following programs were reviewed: S.O.U.L Sisters Leadership Collective, Black Girls Can, Black Girls Smile, The Black Girl Tribe, Gyrl Wonder, BLACK GIRLS ROCK!, Power Play, Pretty Brown Girl, Sister Song, and the Evoluer House. The majority of identified organizations were both women- and BIPOC-led, and focused on academic pathways and career exploration developments, social justice and social impact, reproductive justice, socio-emotional support, self-recognition and appreciation, and cultural learning. On the whole, the investigation of pre-existing empowerment programs designed for young women of color proved to be very fruitful.

  Each organization uses language in their mission statements that stresses inclusivity, support, and empowerment. Generally, words that are frequently used in organizations' mission statements are: community, inspire, ethics, innovate, cultivate, encourage, opportunity, narratives, development, multifaceted, thrive, spectrum, self-discovery, represent, justice, intergenerational, and the like. In addition to these more inherently action oriented words, organizations model age-based inclusivity by extending their female identity descriptors, using words like girls, young women, and women. To that end, S.O.U.L Sisters Leadership Collective in particular extends their programming and supports to "femmes", "non-binary," and "TGNC," transgender/non-conforming in their mission statement: "Our programming aims to provide our S.O.U.L. Sisters with a powerful community of mentors, organizers, activists, educators, and healers that support young women, femmes, and non-binary youth of color blossoming into

leaders with political and self awareness, creative problem solving skills, and strong ethics. We are sensitive to the needs of youth in the foster care, juvenile legal, special education, shelter, and mental health systems[1]." Across the board, language used in organizations' mission statements also indicates the area of development they focus on. In this context, the typical language used is education, philanthropy, justice, career, media, sports/athletics, travel, building, and leadership.

The areas of development and curriculum in each of the organizations is relatively consistent, with each organization having programming that addresses academic pathways and career exploration developments, social justice and social impact, reproductive justice, socio-emotional support, STEM/STEAM, self-recognition and appreciation, and cultural learning. However, though there are quite a few similarities, some of the ways that each organization manifests these deliverables curricularly are unique. For example, Gyrl Wonder provides its community members with tools and resources to enter the media realm, cultivating talents. BLACK GIRLS ROCK! gives community members a platform to host their own podcasts in order to approach narrative sharing and storytelling to ensure personal agency. In contrast, Power Play works with young women to find confidence through engaging in sports and physical activities, spaces they may have been historically precluded from.

Demographics are also of critical importance to these results. The populations these programs work with most are: Native American, African American, Latina, and Asian American. Another critical finding of this research is that most of these organizations are both women- and BIPOC-led. This finding affirms the impact of empowerment, especially coming from advisors that are representatives of the community members themselves. Additionally, after doing a national search, well-known and successful empowerment programs for young women of color

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[1] https://soulsistersleadership.org/about/our-mission-vision/

were not to be found on the west coast. Though some of the researched organizations have become national, they all originated on the east coast or in the south.

Programs from these organizations have led to many successes. Each of the following organizations were highlighted specifically because of their emphasis on and follow-through of having BIPOC women leadership. In the spirit of maintaining agency and personally originated narratives, the following success stories are in the organizations' words:

S.O.U.L Sisters Leadership Collective

"A group of students at Columbia's School of Social Work assessed the effectiveness of S.O.U.L. Sisters' after school workshops conducted at Girls Prep Lower East Side Middle School in NYC. The evaluation aimed to look at how successful these workshops were in achieving S.O.U.L. Sisters' mission of using leadership, social justice, healing, and the arts to support participants on their path to self, community, and global change. Surveys were distributed to the girls as well as to staff at Girls Prep who interact with S.O.U.L. Sisters' participants on a regular basis. The qualitative and quantitative questions aimed to understand the girls' perspective on what they have learned during the workshops and where they saw room for improvement. The questions for staff were intended to see if there were any noticeable differences in the leadership skills and social justice awareness of workshop participants."

The following are statistics from their 2013 Leadership Development Assessment: Leadership-

- 100% Expanded their perception of who leaders are;

- 100% Feel more confident in their leadership;

- 100% Are more able to speak up for what they believe in, even if it is unpopular to do so.

Social & Political Awareness-

- 100% Showed an increase in motivation to fight for social justice;

- 100% Were more aware of individuals and organizations working on social justice issues.

Expanded Career & Life Options-

- 100% Feel more positive about their future;

- 100% Have expanded knowledge of potential careers;

- 100% Feel more inspired to attend college

Social and Emotional Growth-

- 100% Feel more confident;

- 100% Are better able to resolve conflicts.

Peer Relations & Communication-

- 100% Felt a sense of sisterhood;

- 100% Are better able to work in a group;

- 100% Have improved verbal and written communication skills.

At 3 months post-programming-

- No girls had received new criminal charges;

- ALL were engaged in extracurricular activities or employed;

- All were attending school on a regular basis.

These specific successes of S.O.U.L Sisters Leadership Collective reflect not only larger programmatic strengths and participation, but also how participation and programmatic emphases support young women in all areas of their lives, fostering space for collaboration and growth.

Black Girls Can

Black Girls Can reports the following successes: "The Black Girls Can Leadership Academy invites extraordinary young women ages 13 – 18 in New York City and Washington, D.C with leadership potential to embark on an immersive hands-on curriculum which offers workshops, simulations, lectures, field trips and so much more led by industry thought leaders and tastemakers in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Entertainment, Beauty, and Wellness. From this program, girls will establish a further sense of self-worth, become a more well-rounded student, gain a stronger sense of self-esteem, increase their curiosity for STEAM education and consider entrepreneurship in the near future. This program will not only make a difference in the students' lives but enhance the classroom discussion and build future leaders of tomorrow." Black Girls Can's programming supports young women broadly, preparing them to go forward in whatever field they are interested in, facilitating increases in confidence and reassuring them that any space they want to enter and explore is a option, and their success in that space is not only possible, but also likely.

Black Girl Tribe

"Hey Sis Hey! allows Black Girls to share in intimate moments of empowerment with one another from anywhere in the world. No matter what the situation may be, by writing a letter or requesting one you help us change the narrative that Black girls and women do not "like" or

support each other. Receiving a letter from a fellow Black Girl Magician with words full of love, support, encouragement, and empowerment could not only change your sister's life, it could save it." This specific excerpt emphasizes the importance of mental health and intra-community support systems, which speaks to the overall goals of empowerment and personal agency; communities do not need to be saved.

On their partnership with Nike, Black Girls Just Do It: "Participating in sports can add healthy physicality, build mental fortitude and community. Through sports we learn to be competitive, but always play fair. To be inclusive, collaborative and respectful. We learn to be passionate about our own potential, and when we're working together there's no telling what we can do. In our continued commitment to the betterment of Black Girls we are excited to provide opportunities for our participants to explore activities that can add these elements to their everyday life." Like Power Play, Black Girl Tribe utilizes a space that women have historically been excluded from in order to not only imbue the importance of collaboration and teamwork, but also to encourage female-identifying community members to engage in activities that they are passionate about and interested in, rather than activities that have been assigned to them based on unfounded, socially enforced gender roles and stereotypes.

Discussion

The purpose of this research project was to investigate existing youth empowerment programs designed for young women of color in order to support and inform the Social Justice Learning Institute's programmatic expansion. Currently, the Social Justice Learning Institute's empowerment programs are designed to support young men of color specifically. The main findings of this research are the following: 1) peer organizations have programming that addresses academic pathways and career exploration developments, social justice and social

impact, reproductive justice, socio-emotional support, STEM/STEAM, self-recognition and appreciation, and cultural learning; 2) organization leadership tends to consist of BIPOC individuals and the demographics of these organizations, both in leadership and participants, includes Native American, African American, Latina, and Asian American; 3) language used across organizations typically emphasizes community, intersectionality, encouragement, and personal agency; and 4) there are few programs that support the empowerment of young women of color on the West coast; the majority of these programs exist on the East coast or in the South.

       With regard to the organizations' programming, there is meaningful consistency in curriculum offerings. Organizations tend to focus on the following: academic pathways and career exploration developments, social justice and social impact, reproductive justice, socio-emotional support, STEM/STEAM, self-recognition and appreciation, and cultural learning. A few of the organizations also include programming that gets young women involved in sports and other athletic activities. All of the investigated programs' curriculum plans would certainly be beneficial to the Social Justice Learning Institute, as many of SJLI's existing programs can act as foundations for new curriculum, designed to empower young women of color and reflecting the strengths of previous successes. Because each of the investigated programs strives to support young women in the previously mentioned sectors of development, it is clear that young women need additional and/or different support in those areas, whether it be due to the lack of social belief in the abilities and capabilities of women, the lack of funding for these kinds of personal enrichment programs in schools, or the outright discrimination that young women of color face in these fields. Specifically, there is an indicated need for additional support in the STEM/STEAM fields, spaces where women have been historically excluded from, and, when included, are not believed to be as capable or successful as their male counterparts.

Relatedly, the sports and athletic-based program offerings encourage young women to enter historically male-dominated spaces, emphasizing their abilities, opportunities for participation, and the importance of collaboration.

In terms of the language used by these organizations, there is a clear tendency to use words that foster community, encourage empowerment, and positively affirm capabilities. The words used most frequently by these organizations are the following: community, inspire, ethics, innovate, cultivate, encourage, opportunity, narratives, development, multifaceted, thrive, spectrum, self-discovery, represent, justice, intergenerational. The implications of positively connoted language are vast. Language has the power to build people up, but, in that same tenor, it also has the power to tear people down. In a world where women are constantly and consistently objectified, where racial slurs are relentlessly used, is it obvious that language has an immense impact on how people engage not only with themselves, but also with the world more broadly. Because language has a "fundamental role… in creating a human person with cognitive and creative abilities," the notion that language is directly correlated to how individuals understand the world around them and themselves is strongly reinforced (Popper, 310). To that end, "chief features of cognitive development are caused by internalization of language" (Kohlberg, 184). Language is one of the most oppressive tools for dehumanization and identity degradation, and rather than encouraging individuals and communities to appreciate their cultural and personal nuances, can encourage people to question their own life's value. The inclusion of positive language by these organizations seems deliberate. Using words like the aforementioned not only supports the development of personal agency and self-confidence, but also works to counteract the effects of negative language used against young women of color that diminishes views of the self, ultimately degrading personal capacities. Words are "the tools in a tool-box:

there is a hammer, pliers… The function of words are just as diverse as the functions of the objects;" though we may be unconscious of it, words and language serve as the foundation upon which we construct our realities (Wittgenstein, 6).

In terms of leadership demographics, it is incredibly important to note that the clear majority of investigated organizations have BIPOC women in executive leadership positions. The foundation of this importance is representation, demonstrating to young women of color that personal achievement is possible and that they have the power to choose their life outcomes; they are not beholden to the male figures in their lives, they are not beholden to the racist systems that attempt to restrict them. At this point it is also essential to not only refer to these leaders as "BIPOC women in executive leadership positions," but rather, in the spirit of engagement and meaningful connections, to include their names: Tanisha "Wakumi" Douglas, Kenisha C. Dennis, Lauren Carson, Gabrielle Martinez, Tola Lawal, Beverly Bond, Martice Sutton, Sheri Crawley, Monica Raye Simpson, and Cheryl Ann Wadlington. The work of Marques and Alegria (2011), which highlights the lack of service utilization among ethnic minority communities, reflects the larger contours of the inaccessibility that communities of color face when trying to support their own capacities. And, because Becker, Franco, and Speck's research (2003) finds that minority communities are less likely to be referred to higher levels of care and/or treatment than white people who show and report the same or similar symptoms, ultimately reflecting biases in support and treatment programs that should be accessible to all people. This accessibility is not the reality, confirming why programs designed to support communities of color generally, and, in this case, young women of color specifically, are indicated.

With regard to program origin, there is little variation in where youth empowerment programs designed for young women of color are located. In fact, regardless of their

national/global status, the locations of origin are all either in the South or on the East coast. With this finding in mind, considering how to successfully approach expanding the empowerment programs of the Social Justice Learning Institute, located on the West coast in Inglewood, California, becomes more complex. It is first critical to consider why these programs might not exist, be as prevalent, or accessible on the West coast. Are there gaps in policy and funding? Is there not as severe of a need for these programs on the West coast? Without these types of programs towards the midwest and west coast, there is a lack of representation and support for young women of color in this programmatic capacity. Further investigation is indicated to more fully assess the implications of not having such programs on the west coast, and might highlight why the Social Justice Learning Institute, located in California, is making efforts to expand their programming capacities to support young women of color. The Social Justice Learning Institute is actively looking to expand their programmatic resources, and because race-related social injustices and inequities are rampant and women of color face intersectional discrimination, as a result of their gender and their race, it is reasonable to assume there certainly is a need for programs to support and empower young women of color. In turn, then, it is reasonable to assume that there is in fact a lack of both policy that addresses these community needs and funding to support young women. The question becomes more broad: what specific policies and funding needs to be advocated for in order to successfully support young women of color? Also, how can these programs and funding be incorporated into areas that are currently underserved in this regard?

Relatedly, in terms of the Social Justice Learning Institute expanding their programming, without local references and an idea of what young female communities on the West coast need, the knowledge gained from the Southern and East coast organizations can only go so far to

indicate what the needs of young women of color on the West coast need. Though there are

likely overlaps of necessary support between the young women on both sides of the country, it is

possible and likely that there are location-based differences of experience that require diverse

interventions. To that end, programmatic personalization and tailoring is critical, and the

adaptability of support must be able to vary based on an individual's needs. Ultimately, these

findings are consistent with the reports of Ward and Heidrich (2009), where it is made clear that

African American women face many obstacles to treatment and support, do not often utilize

mental health services, and go undiagnosed. A tangential goal of this research was to find out if

empowerment programs need to be fundamentally different for men and women. On the whole,

while those who identify as young men and young women do have different needs, it seems that

a more generally empathetic and individualized approach is what will be most supportive of

youth empowerment. It is clear that meaningful engagement, the development of personal

relationships, and consistent affirmation of potential and capability are critical to youth

empowerment.

  Limitations are present in nearly every aspect of research. Two of the most prevalent

limitations to this research process were the following: connection with the community partner

and limited engagement generally because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, the

confluence of these factors contributed to less engagement than I had anticipated and hoped for.

Because of the multitude of programs and initiatives that the Social Justice Learning Institute

offers to young men, there just are not enough hours in the day for collaboration. To that end,

because I could not actually go and share space with the Social Justice Learning Institute team

and community members as a result of (justified) COVID-19 precautions, we relied on email

communication and our conversations were sparse. Email communication is proven difficult to

navigate because of inbox overflow, the increased fatigue of being on computers more often and, more specifically, Zoom fatigue. Both of these limitations are completely understandable, and it was my goal to not overburden my partner with additional work.

On the other hand, a limitation of this research question as a whole is that it considers gender as a binary, restricting experiences to those who identify as men and women. In reality, gender exists on a spectrum and plenty of people identify as non-binary. This research, as it stands, is inadequate and cannot fully support those individuals. Future engagement with this project and research topic absolutely requires a broader, more inclusive definition of gender. Ault's research and community engagements reflect the necessity of this inclusion. Upon realizing this gap, I decided to investigate if there were any program for non-binary and/or non-conforming young people of color and did not have luck finding programmatic resources. To that end, an important future research project is developing programs and support networks for non-binary and/or non-conforming young people of color.

Suggestions for Future Research and Next Steps

Rosa Gonzalez's tool, the Community Engagement Spectrum, will continue to be useful in future applications of this research. By having conversations and eliminating hierarchical positions in engagement, the communities themselves can lead discussions about needs and contribute to the overall reformation of oppressive systems. Gonzalez's tool is connected to the data collection procedures of this project because conversation, recognizing positionality, and mutual appreciation of participation is required for this to be successful.

Proposed Procedures for Data Collection

I suggest the following as an approach to interviewing community members, including an interview guide, conversation starter, and potential questions: community-engagement ensures

that community members are exercising control over themselves and their participation. The

interview process is critical to ensuring that participants are spoken with rather than spoken to,

relationships are not only built, but also maintained, and that the research outcomes and

subsequent suggestions for action are informed and authentic. Full conversations between

community members and the interviewer are necessary to reveal what real community needs and

desires are. Avoid taking notes during the interview to hopefully create an environment that is

more conversational, rather than clinical and observational. I suggest the interviews be recorded

(audio only, with the consent of the participant). Plan to keep the interviews very open-ended so

that each participant can provide the information that they feel is most relevant to them, ensuring

that individual nuances can be appreciated whenever possible. That being said, if question

intervention is necessary to make sure that certain fundamental concerns about strategies are

addressed, those interjections should be made.

I suggest the introduction/beginning of each interview begin as follows:

"Hi, thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. The purpose of our conversation is to consider what the research has indicated as successful interventions for supporting and empowering young women. Importantly, a primary goal of this conversation is to ensure that you have a say in and ultimately inform what programs will be integrated into the Social Justice Learning Institute's empowerment initiatives. Knowing what you want to see at the Social Justice Learning Institute and what you would be interested in participating in is critically important. With your permission, I will audio record our conversation; if at any time you want me to pause the recording, I will. To that end, you will be able to review the entire audio recording after we've finished to decide if there is any information that you would like to be stricken from your interview; nothing will move into the final project or deliverable unless you approve it. Additionally, for my own records and for clarity of this interview, can you now please state your name and your relationship to the Social Justice Learning Institute? Thank you!"

These are questions that believe will be foundational to each conversation:
1. How old are you?
2. What are some facets of your identity that you feel are most important to you?
3. What issues do you feel are currently most relevant to you?

4. What experiences related to these issues would you like to share with me?
5. What do you feel is most important to you for being supported?
6. What are you actually hoping to see from these programs?
7. What programs/approaches are you not interested in seeing/participating in?

Provide follow-up inquiries that focus on mental health specifically, identify mental health discrepancies, and potential ways to mediate them, as well as highlighting resources. This follow-up research is important to the project on the whole because of how significantly implicated mental health is in an individual's academic success and empowerment. This second stage - where community-engagement becomes especially critical - should be executed through interviews and conversations with the SJLI communities to determine which strategies they are interested in pursuing and participating in, with the goal of ensuring that there is no assumption/imposition of need and continuing to be aware of positionality. Imposing needs on any community is ineffective, irresponsible, and unsustainable. Interviews should be conducted with both SJLI staff and the young women SJLI hopes to support. In the spirit of imparting agency and not imposing needs, creating mental health support programs that are based on what they themselves identify as what they want and what they feel is indicated, young women of color are encouraged to advocate for themselves, empowered to realize their own agency, and can engage in whatever they are interested in, not just what they feel limited to. Getting to know each participant as an individual rather than an informant or statistic is essential. Because this work can also serve as a cathartic space for participants to share their experiences, take ownership of their personal narratives, and be empowered, interviewers should strive to make themselves available to and vulnerable in sharing personal experiences (that are related to the context of this research) to ensure reciprocity, to avoid invasiveness, and affirm commitment to community members.

It is also critical that each individual contributing personal experiences and/or anecdotal information will have confidentiality; no one should ever feel that their privacy is compromised or feel compelled to participate. Privacy will be protected by using aliases and eliminating any information that might indicate who an individual is. However, there will certainly be options for people to make themselves known: another foundational component of this project is to, as previously stated, serve as a healing space that encourages the sharing of experiences and cultivates the recognition of and engagement with personal agency, owning individual personhood.

Informed consent is fundamental to research like this; participants must understand and be aware of the nature of any research project they are participating in, and their consent must be acquired before they begin participating (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 63; 2011). An informed consent letter is currently being developed. In this letter, participants will be assured that their participation is completely voluntary and they can leave the research whenever and if ever they no longer wish to be a part of it. That is, a participant must be able to leave at any time during the research process, even after they have completed their participation.

Proposed Procedures for Data Analysis

The analysis of this work, similar to the research project overall, should be collaborative. Again, in acknowledging personal experiences and position in this project, knowing that ideas and/or instincts about the efficacy of the strategies that are identified from the literature review and program analysis must be verified by the individuals who these strategies are aiming to support. Fostering an environment where all members of the SJLI can weigh in on what strategies they feel most excited about, what strategies they would feel most comfortable participating in, what strategies they feel would be potentially troublesome, or the like. In this way, analysis can be

grounded in confluence of opinion, discourse, and conversation that results from sharing. Again, participants' information will be presented in such a way that maintains confidentiality and protects their privacy.

Because the interviews will be recorded, after the interview takes place, transcribing the interview and taking note of any comments/parts of the conversation that seem especially relevant is critical. Next, the interview recording and transcriptions must be shared with each interviewee, to confirm that they are comfortable with the information shared, and/or if there is anything they would like to be stricken and left out of the final work. The reasoning for \ sharing the interview transcription is also to provide the space for participants to add any additional information they want after the interview. In addition to sharing the transcription with the interviewee, any notes taken while transcribing the interview of moments that stood out as important must be shared, to ask for approval of personal interpretation. If the interviewee agrees with interpretations of importance, encouraging elaboration on that moment if they would like to add anything or focus on another related component is a good idea. Sharing the transcriptions and notes are essential to having total transparency, full community collaboration, and encouraging the community to control the information that moves forward in the project.

Appendix

Data Collection Tools

1. *Literature Review Framework*

    - The literature review framework for this project is grounded in finding procedures and existing programs that have proven to be effective and productive for empowering young women of color. That is, the literature pieces reviewed are centered around trauma-informed therapy modalities, how racism affects health outcomes, specific mental health conditions that shed light on how people of color are treated and cared for in clinical mental health settings, and woman-specific treatment courses. Additionally, putting each piece of literature in conversation with each other is critical to the framework being employed, in that it will further elucidate the intersections between certain barriers, experiences, and treatment outcomes in this field. The literature review will be delivered to the community partner as a word document, with a short report on each literature piece in isolation and in conversation with other related reviewed works.

        - Literature List:

- Ault, Stacey Michelle, "Queens Speak - A Youth Participatory Action Research Project: Exploring Critical Post-Traumatic Growth among Black Girls within the School to Prison Pipeline" (2017). Doctoral Dissertations. 348.
- Becker, A.E., Franco, D.L., Speck, A., & Herzog, D.B. (2003). Ethnicity and differential access to care for eating disorder symptoms. International Journal of Eating Disorders, 33(2), 205-212. DOI: 10.1002/eat.10129
- Becker, C.B., Middlemass, K., Taylor, B., Johnson, C., Gomez, F. (2017). Food Insecurity and Eating Disorder Pathology. *International Journal of Eating Disorders,* vol. 50 (9), 1031-1040. DOI: 10.1002/eat.22735.
- Stephanie S. Covington (2008) Women and Addiction: A Trauma-Informed Approach, *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*. 2008 Nov. 40(5): 377-385, DOI: 10.1080/02791072.2008.10400665
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- Godart, N.T., Flament, M. F., Perdereau, F. & Jeammet, P. (2002). Comorbidity between eating disorders and anxiety disorders: a review. *International Journal of Eating Disorders,* vol. 32 (8), 253-270. DOI: 10.1002/eat.10096.
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- Okazaki S.(2009) Impact of Racism on Ethnic Minority Mental Health. Perspectives on Psychological Sciences. 2009 Jan; 4(1):103-7. DOI: 10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01099.x.
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2. *Landscape Analysis:*

- What is the scope of current programs focused on empowering young women of color, generally?
- What are specific success stories? Obstacles/barriers?
- Are they BIPOC and/or woman led?
- Where do they tend to be located?
- Which demographic groups are typically served by these programs?
- What areas of development do these programs focus on?
- Identified Programs:
    - The Evoluer House
    - Sister Song
    - Pretty Brown Girl
    - Girls Going Global
    - Power Play
    - BLACK GIRLS ROCK!
    - Gyrl Wonder
        - Link to Information Spreadsheet:
            - https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1aPe3BPlT0AAxu Ee9aiArV7_f7HHSzXabz5IKoWMQPZE/edit?usp=sharing

Source List

Ault, Stacey Michelle, "Queens Speak - A Youth Participatory Action Research Project: Exploring Critical Post-Traumatic Growth among Black Girls within the School to Prison Pipeline" (2017). Doctoral Dissertations. 348.

Becker, A.E., Franco, D.L., Speck, A., & Herzog, D.B. (2003). Ethnicity and differential access to care for eating disorder symptoms. International Journal of Eating Disorders, 33(2), 205-212. DOI: 10.1002/eat.10129

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