

# ON URBAN GROUND: UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN-AMERICAN INTERGENERATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS IN URBAN COMMUNITIES

Shawn A. Ginwright  
*San Francisco State University*

*Fewer job opportunities, rising violence, and failing schools have all shaped the structure of opportunities for both youth and adults in urban communities. However, researchers understand very little about how these factors influence the capacity for adults in urban communities to form meaningful partnerships with youth. First, this article explores how urban environments shape youth–adult partnerships within African-American communities. Second, the article promotes the idea that adult development is a necessary component of effective intergenerational partnerships in urban communities. Third, the article highlights innovative practices that focus on how to support the development of adults to more effectively partner with young people. © 2005 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

## **URBAN COMMUNITIES AS A CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING INTERGENERATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS**

Thinking about urban communities as a context for understanding intergenerational partnerships emphasizes that partnerships are shaped by the environment in which they occur. Youth–adult partnerships (Y-APs) in urban African-American communities are often strained by economic conditions, social isolation, and sometimes violence,

---

Correspondence to: Shawn A. Ginwright, Department of Black Studies, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132. E-mail: shawng@sfsu.edu

all of which can limit effective partnerships with young people.<sup>1</sup> Researchers, however, understand very little about how these factors influence the capacity of adults in urban communities to form meaningful partnerships with youth. This article explores several important ideas about the nature of Y-APs in urban African-American communities. First, it explores how urban environments shape Y-APs. The distinctions between youth and adults are sometimes obscured for urban youth, who sometimes assume adult roles by raising siblings and earning money to pay rent. These responsibilities, traditionally held by adults, complicate rigid notions of the developmental process that conceptualize adulthood as an “achievement” or “final product” of adolescence. Second, this article promotes the idea that low-income urban communities present unique challenges for adults, and therefore can limit effective intergenerational partnerships. Because of urban pressures, adults need developmental strategies that facilitate personal and social transformation. In order to build meaningful intergenerational relationships in urban communities of color, adult development must be an integral community-building and youth-development strategy because intergenerational efforts can be thwarted by environmental and generational tensions. Third, this article highlights innovative practices from three organizations that include an adult development strategy in their partnerships with youth.

### **HOW URBAN COMMUNITIES SHAPE INTERGENERATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS**

Few would disagree that partnerships between adults and youth can be a powerful and effective community-building and youth-development strategy. Youth–adult partnerships can be described as a collaborative effort where youth and adults come together to work on common issues. Unlike mentoring, where the relationship is one-on-one and often shaped by an adult role model, Y-APs encourage shared decision-making and shared power, and they embrace a collective spirit, which emphasizes group success.

Urban communities, however, present a unique set of challenges for intergenerational work. For example, how do social, community, or even personal issues impact effective Y-APs? What is required from adults to effectively partner with youth in urban communities? How do culture and ethnicity influence the nature of Y-APs? Answering these questions requires an exploration into the social–political realities that shape urban communities, as well as insight into how these issues shape day-to-day experiences of adult community members. As Camino (2000) accurately noted, “It is critical be cognizant of existing conditions in the communities where youth–adult partnerships are played out” (p. 16). Issues such as racism, poverty, high rates of incarceration, and social isolation contribute to a unique set of relationships between youth and adults. Striving for more effective partnerships requires that we have a greater understanding of the impact of these forces on both young people and their adult collaborators.

There are generally two ways to categorize the factors that shape Y-APs in urban communities: environmental tensions and generational tensions. Environmental tensions are quality-of-life issues that are shaped by racism, low-wage work, crime, and lack of safety. James Garbarino (1995) has referred to these issues as social toxins—a

---

<sup>1</sup>I use the term youth to refer to young people between the ages of 15 and 20.

term used to represent the degree to which social issues have become poisonous to a community's well being. Environmental tensions such as violence, poverty, domestic and sexual abuse, family disruption, and racism shape Y-APs because they add stress to individual partners. These factors also compel adults to provide high levels of engagement and support to youth. For example, youth who need housing or who have expressed that they cannot go to school because of the threat of deadly violence require an unanticipated level of adult engagement. In some cases, adult partners find themselves serving as case managers, providing youth shelter in their homes and mediating disputes that sometimes turn violent. For Y-APs, this can mean that new relationships can be consumed by "crises-management" activities. In turn, this can lead to burn out and stress for adult members.

In some cases, environmental tensions also obscure traditional decision-making roles among adults and youth in working-class communities (Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Steinberg, 1996). For example, researchers have highlighted how, in welfare-dependent families, welfare reform has shifted traditional adult responsibilities to youth. Increasingly, youth are expected to assume responsibilities normally held by their parents, such as paying bills, caring for younger siblings, purchasing clothes, and/or finding housing for the family because their parents are required by welfare regulations to work more hours and therefore have less time to complete household responsibilities (Brooks, Hair, & Zaslow, 2001). Shifting these additional tasks, and consequently more adult-like decision-making responsibilities, to youth adds stress to young peoples' home lives. For example, when I interviewed youth and adult partners from 15 youth service providers in the Bayview—Hunters Point district in San Francisco, California, I learned that some adolescent girls in this community simply did not want additional decision-making power and responsibilities in their youth programs because they were required to make difficult decisions in their homes regarding childcare for siblings, coordinating grocery shopping, or deciding what to prepare for dinner. Some youth simply wanted to enjoy the opportunity to participate in fun activities in youth organizations without the responsibility, and therefore pressure, to make decisions. Contrary to recent literature about the importance of adults sharing power and decision-making with youth in adult-led organizations (Cervone, 2002; Gibson, 2001; Ginwright, 2003; Irby, Ferber, Pittman, Tolman, & Yohalem, 2001), environmental tensions stemming from welfare reform compel researchers and practitioners to rethink how youth perceive decision-making opportunities in youth programs. Adult partners can misdiagnose how to support young people if they are unaware of the decision-making pressure that youth may experience in their families.

Generational tensions also have a powerful impact on how youth and adults work together. Some adults simply do not understand (and others outright reject) the ways in which today's urban youth express their ideas and beliefs through hip-hop culture. Kitwana (2002) noted that adults from the civil-rights generation could not fully understand African-American youth culture, or the complex modes of oppression confronting today's African-American youth. Whereas racial oppression is no worse today than it was for those who struggled through the civil-rights movement, it has taken on new forms (Lang, 1998). Researchers have argued that the removal of blue-collar work, legislation that has created an unprecedented number of incarcerated young African-American males, and a burgeoning workforce that requires more specialized education have created different modes of racial oppression, which introduce a different set of challenges than adults faced from an earlier generation (Sassen, 1994; Wilson, 1996; Wyn & White, 1997). Kitwana (2002) noted that the older generation's views of

poverty, unemployment, and limited job options “exacerbate tensions between black youth and black adults because older black adults view poverty as simply something many of them overcame” (p.42). As a result, many African-American adults expect the younger generation to overcome poverty and racial discrimination rather than to use these social barriers as an excuse.

Tripp (1987) examined similar tensions among African-American adults and youth by exploring shifts in the ideological patterns of adults from the civil-rights generation who now comprise a sizable sector in the African-American middle class. His longitudinal study found that African-American adults experienced ideological shifts in their views, strategies, and tactics toward improving the conditions for African-American people and concluded that many African-American adults became more individualistic and expressed more faith in institutions to facilitate racial equity for African-American communities. However, African-American youth increasingly have less faith in institutions such as schools, governments, and law enforcement to address pressing community issues (Lang, 1998). Researchers have documented the diverging viewpoints held by African-American adults and youth regarding how to address racial oppression (Kitwana, 2002; Lang, 1998; Males & Macallair, 2000). Observers of African-American civic life have argued that African-American adults from the civil-rights generation have not adequately addressed the complex issues confronting today’s urban youth because the adults fail to understand how political and economic transformations have impacted poor communities (Kitwana, 2002; Sullivan, 1996). These observations have led researchers and policy makers to explore ways to bridge the generational gap in African-American communities and invigorate new intergenerational models that are more relevant to the complex issues facing today’s African-American youth (Sullivan, 1996). Without a deeper understanding of the complex issues facing today’s youth, these tensions will continue to challenge intergenerational work.

### **ADULT DEVELOPMENT: A STRATEGY TO PARTNER WITH YOUTH FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

One way to prepare adults to partner more effectively with youth is to view development as a collective social-change process shared between both adults and youth. For adults who work with youth in urban settings, intergenerational collaboration must be linked to changing the oppressive community conditions confronting today’s youth. Such a perspective necessitates that we shift how we conceptualize the developmental process from one that focuses on isolated, individual development to a more holistic perspective that sees community change as a starting point for effective partnerships. This can be accomplished by developing intergenerational coalitions, alliances, and collaborative projects that confront root and systemic causes of social and community problems such as violence, substance abuse, and food scarcity. This conceptual shift also reminds us that whereas Y-APs are shaped by social and community conditions, intergenerational partnerships also can improve and transform these conditions. Often overlooked by practitioners and researchers, however, is how to prepare adults to effectively engage in intergenerational partnerships that embrace a social-change agenda.

Adult Development (AD) is a strategy to build stronger intergenerational relationships by focusing the psychosocial needs of adults to partner more effectively with youth in community-change efforts. Starting with the assumption that all adults need developmental support when working with youth, AD is a shared process where adults

and youth coalesce around a common agenda directed at self- and social transformation. This requires more than a step-by-step set of skills or a list of competencies. Rather, AD requires adults to adopt a worldview that encourages self-exploration, healing, and the articulation of a clear social-political vision.

This process requires a shift from viewing adulthood as a final product of adolescence where the responsibility of development is placed entirely on young people. Rather than conceptualizing adulthood as individual achievement, AD views adulthood as an ongoing process where personal transformation on the part of adults is a prerequisite for effective partnerships with youth, and ultimately, social change. Similar to Freire's (1993) concept of *conscientizacao*, which is an awareness that the challenges of everyday life are not permanent, but can be transformed, awareness of the interdependence between personal actions and social change is a critical component of AD. Freire illustrated that adults become agents of their own development when they reflect and act to transform the conditions influencing their lives. Fundamental to this approach is to prepare adults to partner with youth through reflecting on their own lives and working with youth toward changing oppressive social and community conditions.

There are a number of practices that can support AD. These practices should not be conceptualized as simply "staff development," but rather viewed in a more holistic way that considers adults' roles as parents, siblings, church leaders, significant others, and partners. In my former role as Executive Director of Leadership Excellence, an organization I founded in 1989 to prepare African-American youth to address problems in their schools and communities, I listened to hundreds of adult volunteers and several employees who pushed my thinking about the role of adults working with youth. They believed that all African-American adults working with African-American children and youth needed to be engaged in self-care and self-improvement. Their analysis was based on their own painful experiences with poverty, racism, violence, and personal trauma. Over a 13-year period, we developed several practices that encouraged adult employees and volunteers to take care of themselves and improve in areas of their lives other than their professional growth. We called it "fostering a culture of wellness." As an organization committed to equity and social justice, our work with young people addressed three primary questions: What developmental practices should adults be engaged in, and how do these practices contribute to more effective intergenerational partnering? What does it mean to be an adult partnering with a youth? How can adults and youth share a common social-political vision, and work together toward personal and social change?

***What Developmental Practices Should Adults Be Engaged in, and How Do These Practices Contribute to More Effective Intergenerational Partnering?***

In my former role as Executive Director of Leadership Excellence, some of our practices were quite simple, such as holding "check-ins" during staff meetings. Each person responded to a predetermined question like, "What is the best thing that happened to you in the last seven days?" Another check-in method was forming informal support groups where adults and youth came together to discuss sensitive issues relevant to their lives. Other practices were more elaborate, such as implementing a 32-hour workweek to encourage adults to spend more quality time with their families, or a proposal to include in our benefits package a six-week sabbatical for every employee

after four years of service. Our belief was that a sabbatical would not only foster more productive employees, but also contribute to adults' spiritual development.

One of our core beliefs was that the prolonged impact of racial oppression has inflicted profound psychological damage to both African-American youth and adults. I often would explain to our youth and adult volunteers, "All black people in America suffer from a psycho-social illness, and one of the most dangerous aspects of our illness is that we are unaware that the illness exists!" Consequently, self-destructive behavior such as violence, substance abuse, and fatalism get misdiagnosed, and are therefore untreated. Poussaint and Alexander (2000) called this illness Posttraumatic Slavery Syndrome—a term that refers to the long-term impact of racism, which contributes to life-threatening activities such as drug use and gun violence. The concept, Posttraumatic Slavery Syndrome, created for both youth and adults involved in Leadership Excellence a common condition and a unified experience of racial oppression. Because we focused on a common experience unique to African Americans, it mitigated generational tensions between youth and adults and set forth the idea that all African-American people—adults and youth—need to engage in an ongoing process of racial healing. In our training with adult volunteers, we emphasized the idea that the quality of intergenerational partnerships was a reflection of "collective" development between youth and adult partners. This required that all adult volunteers participate in the same racial healing process that we expected from our youth. This meant that adults:

1. participate in intergenerational discussions about how they are impacted by racial oppression,
2. understand that they can learn from youth by simply listening and not telling youth what to do about racism, and
3. work through their own self-defeating internalized racial attitudes.

For those who are deeply engaged in intergenerational work in African-American communities, AD is not a new idea. In fact, Simba Inc., formerly located in Oakland, California, used this approach for 13 years. No longer in operation, members of Simba believed that social change was only possible by developing healthy families and strong communities. Simba's philosophy was that African-American children and youth from low-income communities rarely experience healthy long-term, meaningful relationships with adults outside their families. Additionally, the unique experiences of African Americans, beginning with the transatlantic slave trade and resulting in racism, substance abuse, and generations of poverty have destroyed important intergenerational relationships in African-American communities. These experiences have also fostered a "ghetto mind set"—a pattern of thinking and acting that is counterproductive to sustaining healthy communities. Simba's primary goal was to develop and transform African-American adults' belief systems and behaviors so that adults could develop healthy, rich, and meaningful relationships with children and youth. Adult mentors and partners were required to participate in a unique and intensive 72-hour, life-enhancing, attitude- and behavior-modification seminar before working with youth. The seminar focused on healing past personal and social issues in order to develop new behaviors that lead to self-actualization and a new vision for youth. Rather than simply focusing on staff training and professional development, these strategies demonstrated how to promote personal transformation and social justice in an organizational context. Simba's AD process included a holistic strategy to build stronger Y-APs

through a complex understanding of how issues such as poverty and racism impact adults' capacity to form intergenerational partnerships.

### ***What Does It Mean to Be an Adult Partnering With Youth?***

For adults who mentor, counsel, coach, teach, and advise young people, the answer to this question may vary. Similarly, culture, social class, and ethnicity have a significant influence on the ways in which adults interact and work with youth. For some, adult and youth roles are clearly defined by cultural traditions that stipulate that youth should defer to adult community members out of respect for elders, whereas for others, sharing power and decision-making is the norm. Responding to this question means that adults should reflect on how adulthood is defined and practiced in their own cultural milieu, and they consider how notions of adulthood shape young people's lives. Developing a clear answer to this question will contribute to organic relationships where partnerships can transform youth, adults, and the community setting where the partnership occurs.

I recall a difficult group session that I was leading with both youth and adults. During that time in my life, I was having difficulty balancing care of my newborn child, raising money for Leadership Excellence, and transitioning to a new career. As a result of these personal pressures, I could not focus on the training that I was conducting. I was unaware that many of the youth in the group had noticed my level of stress until one young person asked me, "What's wrong?" Until that point, I believed that my role as an adult community leader, founder, and Executive Director was to be a role model to young people by showing them a "trouble-free" adult. In response to her question, I immediately put on the adult, "problem-free" face, and responded that there was nothing wrong with me. After they continued to probe me about why I seemed so stressed out, I finally confessed my troubles. I began describing my fears of not having raised enough money to keep the doors open. I told them how these financial issues would impact my family and new child. I also expressed my thoughts about leaving the organization altogether. After my emotional confession to the group, I was concerned that I had transgressed the boundaries of the adult professional role by violating the unspoken rule that you should separate your personal life from professional activities, but to my surprise, several youth commented, "Hey man, you got problems just like me!" or "I thought you had life all figured out, that's cool that you got issues to deal with." Redefining my role as an adult partner contributed to an unanticipated outcome: I learned that when I made myself vulnerable, the young people could support me by listening just as I had listened to them. My vulnerability actually deepened their respect for me because I was honest with them about something as important as my own life. I am not advocating that all youth-development professionals should make their personal lives available to the young people with whom they work. The lesson I draw from this experience is that AD requires that we create greater space in our work environment to deal with the stressors in our personal lives. Being intentional about how we deal with stress will make us stronger partners in intergenerational efforts.

Leadership Excellence is not alone in this approach to AD. Sustaining the Soul that Serves, an organization based in Bennettsville, South Carolina, believes that adults who work with youth must develop self-care strategies (practices that build an individual's capacity to mitigate stress and trauma) in order to sustain themselves during difficult and stressful times. The work is based on the assumption that adults who are able to

care for themselves may better serve young people. Just as flight attendants remind passengers prior to an airplane's departure, "In the event of an emergency, be sure to secure your own mask *first* before helping others," the organization provides opportunities for adults to secure their own masks (Sustaining the Soul that Serves, 2003). Long-time trainer and program-developer Macheo Payne explained, "We cannot assume that just because you are an adult that you've got life all figured out. As adults, our lives are out of balance because of everyday pressures and other responsibilities which usually get in the way of being effective with youth." The overarching goal of the project is to facilitate the development of a more sustained, productive, and spiritually centered cadre of adult allies who work for social justice and peace in the twenty-first century (Sustaining the Soul that Serves, 2003). Through workshops, meditation, reading material, and discussion groups, adults are given important self-care tools to transform how they think about working with youth.

### ***How Can Adults and Youth Share a Common Social–Political Vision and Work Together Toward Personal and Social Change?***

Sharing a common social–political vision means that Y-APs also serve as learning communities where new ideas and experiences contribute to a collective vision about how to improve the quality of life for oneself and others. In this respect, Y-APs, particularly for communities of color, are intimately tied to community and social change. Today, Leadership Excellence continues to forge new strategies and ideas relevant to intergenerational partnerships in African-American communities through its programs and activities that focus on personal development (youth development and adult development) in order to achieve social change. We believe that by forming a community where both youth and adults commit to personal transformation, we create a shared vision of our communities, our society, and our world.

One of our programs takes place in Accra, Ghana, over a two-week period with an intergenerational group of 15 to 20 youth and adults from Oakland, California. Participants in the program learn first-hand about the devastating impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade by visiting the slave castle dungeons on the coast of West Africa. They also spend time with Ghanaian youth and learn how both local and global issues impact their lives. In the evenings, we debrief experiences that transpired during the day. The conversations are often emotional as people share their feelings of guilt, anger, and shame about what they experienced or saw. For example, after spending time with Ghanaian youth, our group learned that many young people in Ghana had to work several months in order to save up enough money to pay for high school. Youth and adult partners comment about how they took their own educational opportunities for granted and failed to appreciate the opportunities granted to them in their own communities. They also discussed how they made new connections between history and the present day conditions for African Americans in America. The program participants' exposure to pervasive poverty, lack of educational opportunities, and the absences of simple everyday conveniences in Africa shaped a common social–political vision about their own lives and their respective communities. Upon returning to Oakland, some adult and youth members have changed their appearance by locking their hair or began wearing traditional African clothing to demonstrate a newfound pride in their African heritage. These personal gestures also translated to increased political engagement in issues relevant to Africa, such as participation in organizations that are fighting to reduce AIDS in Africa or joining educational opportunities to

return and learn more about other African nations. Others program participants have created their own programs in their schools or places of employment dedicated to meeting the needs of African-American youth from urban communities. Developing an intergenerational social-political vision can foster richer, deeper, and more meaningful connections between members, both within communities and across borders.

### **CONCLUSION: OPENING NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

Building strong communities requires that practitioners and researchers pay greater attention to the social, economic, and cultural factors that contribute to the success and failure of intergenerational partnerships. For low-income communities of color that continue to experience economic devastation and social decay, focusing on the development of adults presents a host of unique opportunities to enhance and strengthen intergenerational community-building efforts. First, by developing an appreciation of how environmental and generational tensions shape partnerships, researchers and policy makers enjoy a broader understanding of what inhibits and promotes healthy intergenerational partnerships. Broader thinking about how both environmental and generational tensions influence Y-APs can shift the focus from a singular and linear notion of development ending with adulthood, toward a more holistic understanding where development is conceptualized as a lifelong process.

Second, developing and sharing a clear social-political vision with young people encourages adult partners to be intentional about how they view their roles and the roles of young people in community-change efforts. Adult Development is one promising strategy that focuses on the developmental needs of adults and provides opportunities for adults to explore their own identities, life challenges, and histories in ways that are connected to broader social, political, and economic change. This strategy adds value to these important intergenerational relationships because they expand opportunities for “collective” development between adults and youth, and they encourage us to consider how intergenerational alliances shape, direct, and sometimes transform our social and political landscape.

Rethinking Y-APs opens new and exciting possibilities for community change. My experience tells me that youth-development professionals need to connect the social and economic conditions that young people face with relevant community-building strategies. Strategies that develop and sustain adult youth workers require innovative ideas that connect personal transformation with social change. By considering how to develop adults to more effectively support young people, we move forward collectively to building stronger communities and a healthier society.

### **REFERENCES**

- Brooks, J.L., Hair, E.C., & Zaslow, M.J. (2001). Welfare reform's impact on adolescents: Early warning signs (Child Trends research brief). Washington, DC: Child Trends.
- Camino, L. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4(1), 11–20.
- Cervone, B. (2002). Taking democracy in hand: Youth action for educational change in the San Francisco bay area. Takoma Park, MD: What Kids Can Do Inc. with The Forum for Youth Investment.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (revised 20th anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.

- Garbarino, J. (1995). *Raising children in a socially toxic environment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gibson, C. (2001). *From inspiration to participation: A review of perspectives on youth civic engagement* (Report, pp. 1–22). New York: Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service in cooperation with Carnegie Corporation.
- Ginwright, S. (2003). *Youth organizing: Expanding possibilities for youth development* (Funder's Collaborative on Youth Organizing: Occasional Paper Series, Paper #3). New York: Funder's Collaborative on Youth Organizing.
- Irby, M., Ferber, T., Pittman, K., Tolman, J., & Yohalem, N. (2001). *Youth action: Youth contributing to communities, communities supporting youth: Vol. 6. Community Youth Development Series*. Takoma Park, MD: The Forum for Youth Investment.
- Kitwana, B. (2002). *The hip-hop generation: Young blacks and the crisis in African American culture* (1st ed.). New York: Basis Civitas Books.
- Lamborn, S., Dornbusch, S., & Steinberg, L. (1996). Ethnicity and community context as moderators of the relations between family decision making and adolescent adjustment. *Child Development, 67*, 283–301.
- Lang, C. (1998). Political/economic restructuring and the tasks of radical black youth. *The Black Scholar, 28*(3/4), 30–37.
- Males, M., & Macallair, D. (2000). *The color of justice*. Washington, DC: Building Blocks for Youth.
- Poussaint, A., & Alexander, A. (2000). *Lay my burden down. Unraveling suicide and the mental health crisis among African-Americans*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Sassen, S. (1994). *Cities in a world economy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Sullivan, L. (1996). The demise of black civil society: Once upon a time when we were colored meets the hip-hop generation. *Social Policy, 27*(2), 6–10.
- Sustaining the Soul that Serves. (2003). About sustaining the soul that serves. Retrieved August 19, 2003, from <http://www.sustainingthesoul.org/about.htm>
- Tripp, L.S. (1987). *Black student activists: Transition to middle class professionals*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Wilson, W.J. (1996). *When work disappears*. New York: Random House.
- Wyn, J., & White, R. (1997). *Rethinking youth*. London: Sage.

Copyright of Journal of Community Psychology is the property of John Wiley & Sons Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.