

Larson, R. W., Jensen, L. A., Kang, H., Griffith, A, & Rompala, V. (2012). Peer groups as a crucible of positive value development in a global world. In Trommsdorff, G., & Chen, X. (Eds.), Values, Religion, and Culture in Adolescent Development (pp. 164-187). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Peer Groups as a Crucible of Positive Value Development in a Global World

Reed W. Larson, Lene Arnett Jensen, Hyeyoung Kang, Aisha Griffith, Vicki Rompala

Running Head: Peer Processes of Positive Value Development

Keywords: Value Development, Positive Development, Adolescence, Developmental Processes, Globalization, Peer Processes

Globalization is increasing the challenges that adolescents face in developing values. In many societies, adult authority and traditional systems for transmitting values are diminishing (Friedman, 2000; Schlegel, 2011) and youth are confronted with more diverse value positions. Furthermore, migration and urbanization place large numbers of youth in multicultural communities in which they encounter different value systems on a daily basis (Tienda & Wilson, 2002). A young person, for example, may experience traditional Muslim, Hindu, or Christian values at home, secular values at school, and materialistic values in the media.

How do youth form prosocial values in the face of this diversity? Much has been written about how the global confluence of diverse groups creates stress and alienation (Berry, 1997; Chao & Otsuki-Clutter, 2011). In this chapter we examine conscious *constructive processes* through which youth facing this challenge are able to develop positive, prosocial values¹. Theories often describe adolescent value development as a solitary Eriksonian undertaking. In contrast we identify processes within peer groups through which constructive value work is accomplished. To do this we are going to focus on peer interactions within organized youth programs (such as, arts, technology, civic, and faith-based programs and youth organizations), a setting that provides a rich laboratory for observing positive developmental processes including value development (Larson, 2000, 2011). Hosang (2008) suggests that programs can provide “structured strategic spaces” in which youth “can make sense of the vexing and contradictory forces that shape their lives” (p.16).

Why focus on peer processes? Given the erosion of traditional authority, peers often fill the vacuum as a major arena in which youth shape their values. We know peers can be powerful (Chen, 2011). Volumes of research show how they can have negative influences. Processes of

¹ We recognize that the meaning of terms like positive, prosocial, and even development can vary across (and even within) cultures (Jensen, 2011), but we hope our text adequately reflects this possibility without our taking pains to make it a major focus.

imitation, peer pressure, and “deviance training” can increase teenagers’ prejudicial (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Gonzales & Cauce, 1995) and antisocial behavior (Dodge, Lansford & Dishion, 2006). Yet the positive role that peers can play in adolescent development is often underestimated (Allen & Antonishak, 2008; Newman & Newman, 2001). Research shows that the majority of peer influence is toward prosocial values (Brown, 2004), and that peer interactions can enhance learning through processes of reciprocal scaffolding and co-construction (Rogoff, 1998). In this chapter we advance the theory that – under the right conditions – peer processes can be a powerful vehicle for value development in a global world.

Piaget (1965) provided preliminary theory on constructive peer processes associated with value development. He posited that the experience of equality and reciprocity in peer relationships creates conditions in which moral values and principles “impose” themselves on older children’s and adolescents’ reasoning. In an expansive passage, he argued that relations of reciprocity with peers “will suppress egocentrism and suggest to the intellectual and moral consciousness norms capable of purifying the contents of the common laws themselves” (p. 395). Interactions with equals, Piaget argued, can make moral codes logically self-evident and compelling. Piaget’s conception of these processes, we now realize, was the product of Western culture, indeed an optimistic Enlightenment strain within that culture. Young people’s moral development involves more than logical principles. It involves cultivation of moral reasoning adapted to the nuances of situations, contexts, and cultural meaning systems (Jensen, 2008).

We begin this chapter by providing groundwork for thinking about adolescents’ task of value development within a world of diverse values. Next, we discuss what is known about the conditions needed for positive value development and examine organized youth programs as an institutional context that can provide these conditions. In the heart of the chapter we then

describe three peer processes that our research suggests can be vehicles of prosocial value development. We employ a case study of one American youth program to illustrate how youth can work together to actively co-construct prosocial values adapted to a heterogeneous society. In the final section, we then broaden the discussion to consider how these processes might vary across societal and cultural contexts.

II. The Challenges Adolescents Face and the New Skills They Bring to the Table

Adolescence is a key time for youth to begin to inhabit value systems. Research shows it is a time of flux when values are changing and becoming internalized (Eisenberg et al, 2006; Jensen, 2008). Traditional societies have long recognized this and held adolescent rites of passage aimed at passing on responsibility for value systems to youth (Gilmore, 1990). It is notable that youth typically participate in these rites as members of a peer group.

Challenges to Value Development in Heterogeneous Societies

In a global world, however, taking ownership of a system of values has become a more difficult task, one that requires more deliberate agency from youth. Children may be raised within parents' value system, yet (especially as they move into adolescence) they are exposed to multiple moral codes (Jensen, 2011). These codes can involve fundamentally different assumptions, world views, and degrees of priority given to self, community, and a deity (Jensen, 2008). Youth may face the challenge of reconciling their parents' conceptions of right and wrong with alternative moral codes. They may face daily situations that pit different value systems and moral priorities against each other: loyalty to clan, sacred traditions, individualism; also different notions of when and how respect for others is expressed. For youth from immigrant families and minority groups, the challenges may include dealing with people and images that denigrate one's own value system, practices, and identity (Berry, 1997; Halverson, 2009). Whether a youth is

part of a stigmatized or privileged group, prosocial value development requires dealing with the injustice of cross-group misunderstanding and mistreatment.

The stakes are high. Some youth fail to formulate a consistent set of values. At the psychological level, this confluence of cultures can result in cultural dislocation (Berry, 1997; Giddens, 2000) and identity confusion (Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011). At the societal level, it can feed intergroup conflict and lead to a citizenry that is uncommitted to and disengaged from civic participation (Huntington, 2004).

Value development entails the task of understanding how different codes apply to self and others across daily situations. Youth must begin to sort out how different moral arguments translate to variegated cultural contexts. How do you act in a situation when your parents' values dictate a different response than the moral codes in force with peers, at school, or in a work context? How do you “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” when the others have been shaped by different life experiences – or when they disrespect your values?

These are complex questions. In order to comfortably inhabit prosocial values, adolescents must figure out how to act in contexts where multiple mentalities and value systems are at play.

The New Cognitive Skills of Adolescence

Though the task is formidable, adolescents become capable of developing new *metacognitive skills* for doing this value work. They become able to reason about complex systems. These include systems of abstract principles (including value systems) (Fischer & Bidell, 2006; Kuhn, 2009). They also include “messy” human systems, for example, the diverse untidy dynamics of psychological processes and social transactions. These new skills include those for thinking about *interactions between* different kinds of systems (Fischer & Bidell,

2006), such as interactions between two moral codes – or between the principles of a moral code and the real-world dynamics of human relationships. Adolescents start to be able to compare, construct, analyze, and apply arguments across diverse systems. Given the right experiences, they become able to think systematically about arguments that begin from different premises (Kuhn, 2009).

For the task of prosocial development in a heterogeneous world, a key is adolescents' expanding potentials for perspective taking: for understanding other people's subjective points of view. With the right experiences, they can learn to better imagine and predict the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others (Selman, 2003), including of others from different backgrounds (Killen, Kim-Lee, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002; Quintana, 1998). Adolescents also develop the capacity for biographical reasoning. They become able to think about how the experiences in people's lives have influenced them: why they act as they do (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Habermas, 2011). Along with this, adolescents gain the potential to recognize the systematic fallacies and biases in *their own* thought processes and learn to counteract them (Watkins, Larson & Sullivan, 2007). Though adolescents are at a novice level, these new and more advanced capabilities allow them to progressively understand others as moral beings, reacting to situations in intentional, predictable ways.

These diverse skills – it must be emphasized – are potentials. They cannot be expected to develop and become elaborated automatically. To learn to apply them to complex daily contexts requires work. It should also be emphasized that these skills are acquired over time through many small steps. There is a broad consensus in developmental psychology that “what develops” in social-cognitive development is not so much formal logical operations (as envisioned by Piaget) but a *constructed web*. As articulated by Fischer and Bidell (2006), young people

accumulate “strands” of knowledge, insights, arguments, elements of skills, etc.; and they connect them together: “a given strand may be tenuous at first” but with added experience, “it becomes a stable part of the web” (p. 319).

This metaphor of a web is better fitted to the requirements young people face in understanding messy human systems in which behavior is contextual, contingent, and multi-layered. Though not nearly as elegant as Piaget’s formal structures, this conception of development as a process of constructing webs will be helpful when we consider how youth figure out different value codes – and how to apply them across the nuances of daily situations.

The Task of Value Development

Of course, value development is not entirely a deliberate cognitive process. Moral thought and behavior is also influenced by basic human needs and emotions (although they too can be developed). First, neurological mechanisms, such as those for attachment and empathy, are believed to exert an influence toward the development of prosocial behavior and values (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Laursen & Hartup, 2002). Humans are social creatures, programmed to help each other – at least within their circle of kith and kin. But there are other basic dispositions that can compete with prosocial behavior, such as emotional systems that serve self-preservation. It is argued that extending prosocial behavior beyond one’s immediate family and community may necessitate overriding one’s basic evolutionary dispositions toward in-group favoritism (Templeton & Eccles, 2008).

The task of positive value development involves nurturing prosocial dispositions while balancing needs of the self in accordance with cultural codes. To become a contributing member of society requires the work of training oneself *when* to feel anger, contempt, pity, and benevolence – and when to suppress inappropriate expressions of these feelings. This is hardly a

new insight: 2500 years ago Confucius described moral development as involving a process of refining moral emotions and sensibilities. David Hume said similar things from a Western cultural perspective. In a multicultural world this may involve cultivating hybrid moral sensibilities that incorporate multiple value traditions.

This difficult value work is not easily done alone. Youniss (2009) argues that it is more likely to happen within the context of institutions and through interpersonal interaction. Youth programs are institutions that generally see value development as one of their goals; and they see peer interactions as a mechanism for cultivating it.

III. Organized Youth Programs as a Peer Arena for Value Development

The young women in SisterHood², a consciousness raising program, were struggling with the challenges of fitting into a world of diverse values. SisterHood is in a Chicago neighborhood that has been an entry point for generations of immigrant groups. About half the young women's families were from West African nations, and they experienced challenges reconciling their parents' values with values they experienced in other parts of their lives. One youth, Bernita, said her Nigerian mother kept telling her, "*You're not an American girl. You remember that. You don't act like an American girl.*" The other youth were African American, and they too faced inter-generational tensions. The mother of one expected her to adhere to strict Mormon values. Some SisterHood youth acceded to parents' values; some resisted. Many were attracted to materialistic or street values; some were experimenting with sexuality. All experienced the challenges of growing up as a Black woman in America.

We use Sisterhood to provide a close up view of one ethnically diverse peer group's processes in addressing the challenges of value development. It is, of course, only one group of youth within one program; and these youth were coming of age within a particular cultural

² All names of programs, youth, and leaders are pseudonyms.

context: an individualistic society that places a high emphasis on individual agency (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). But it is illustrative of other American programs we have studied; and we will give central attention to issues of cultural context in our final section

Youth Programs and Value Development

As is true of many organized programs, value development was part of Sisterhood's mission. In the United States, most youth programs identify prosocial value development as one of their goals (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). This mission of encouraging positive value development appears to be present in programs across nations, although differences occur in programs' philosophy for achieving it and the cultural code of values that programs aim to cultivate (e.g., Alvarez, 1994; Haedicke & Nelhaus, 2001; Patel, 2007).

Research confirms that youth programs, indeed, can have positive impact on values. Longitudinal and experimental studies in the U.S. show significant effects of programs on prosocial behavior (Durlak et al, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2009). In two surveys, American teens reported substantially *higher* rates of experiences that promote prosocial value development in organized programs than in school classes. These experiences included learning to help others, stand up for what is right, compromise, and appreciate people from different ethnic backgrounds. (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2007). Though less complete, survey and qualitative data from other countries provides evidence of similar effects of programs on prosocial values (Alvarez, 1994; Johnson, Johnson-Pynn, & Pynn, 2007).

In our longitudinal qualitative study of SisterHood and 10 other high quality arts, technology, and leadership programs, we observed these changes over time.³ First, across

³ In each of the 11 programs, we followed a sample of 8-12 youth (total 108) over 2-9 months of program activity (a total of 712 interviews). We also conducted site observations and interviews with program leaders. The majority of the programs were urban. Two-thirds of the youth were from non-European ethnic groups, and approximately a quarter were from immigrant families (see Larson & Angus, 2011a).

programs, many youth described a shift in their value orientation from “I” toward “we.” They reported becoming less self-focused, learning to give more attention to other people’s needs and the common good. Jackie, a 14-year-old, reported that a year before joining SisterHood she had been engaged in antisocial activities: *“getting into fights and getting into gangs...I really didn’t care about people. I had no remorse.”* But she said that SisterHood, *“surely did help me, because ... this year, I think about people’s feelings more, and how I would feel if that was me.”* Her fighting had diminished and she was no longer involved in gangs. This value shift from I towards we has been found in other research on youth programs as one from “atomism to collective agency” (Kirshner, 2009) and “island to archipelago” (Deutsch, 2007).

Second, many youth in our programs reported learning to better understand and appreciate the value codes of others. They described learning to examine assumptions of different values systems and sort out moral arguments, and develop moral sensibilities that took this diversity into account. For example, a young woman at Youth Action, explained, *“Now I see different races and I try to talk to them and try to be as friendly as I [would] be to my own race”* (Watkins et al., 2007). A number of youth also said the programs broadened their sense of responsibility to the wider society – they developed civic and social justice values (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Latisha at SisterHood said: *“Being in that program makes you want to better yourself and the community around you.”* They widened their circle of empathic and moral concern (cf. Templeton & Eccles, 2008).

Conditions for Value Development

But how do these value changes occur? Before describing the change processes, it is important to discuss what is known about the contextual preconditions for these processes. Research (mostly in the United States) indicates that positive development is most likely in

settings that have specific features. These include supportive relationships and positive social norms; they also include youth feeling safe, feeling they belong, and having an active role in what happens in the setting (Durlak et al, 2010; Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

A more focused body of research shows specific features associated with reduction in prejudice toward and acceptance of outsiders (i.e. expanded moral inclusivity). Consistent findings across nations indicates that this value change is most likely when youth interact with members of diverse groups under conditions of equality, cooperation, and common purpose; also when adults in the setting support this change (Pettigrew, 1998).

SisterHood as a Setting for Youth Development

The adult leaders of SisterHood, Lynn and Janet, wanted to create similar conditions for facilitating youth's development of prosocial values. They also were acutely aware of the challenges these young women faced in a value-heterogeneous and sometimes hostile society. So they placed a high priority on helping members become independent critical thinkers who were prepared to act on their beliefs. To achieve this goal, they felt that the conditions within the group and the process of value development had to come at least partly from the youth.

To this end, at the start of the year Lynn and Janet asked one of the returning members to lead a discussion to set the rules the youth wanted to follow. Youth started with humorous suggestions: "no fighting; no biting." Then they came up with a good American list: listening without interrupting, being non-judgmental, offering experience not advice, sharing decision making, honesty and confidentiality. Over subsequent sessions the youth and leaders reminded each other of these rules, sometimes challenging members who violated them. Over time these rules became internalized as group norms. They became part of a *group culture* that created conditions of equality, cooperation, and common purpose (see also Larson, 2007).

Research on group dynamics indicates that a crucial step in formation of a well-functioning group is development of mutual trust (Wheelan, Davidson & Tilin, 2003). At SisterHood these rules – this internalized culture – became the foundation for this trust. Mutual trust in groups creates a feeling of interpersonal safety, which allows people to take risks and break out of their egocentric shell (Hollingshead et al., 2005). Midway through the year, Chantel reported: "*We're like this big group of goofy people that like to be around each other. We give each other space and we respect each other's ideas.*" K'sea said of her peers: "*like they understand you and you understand them.*" We found that a similar shared culture and mutual trust developed, in differing degrees, across other programs we studied.

Research on group dynamics identifies another feature of groups that may facilitate the difficult work of developing values and learning to apply them to complex contexts. They can provide beneficial conditions for collaborative information processing (Hinsz, Tindale, & Vollrath, 1997). When there is mutual trust, working groups develop collective memory. They become better at retrieving past information than when individuals are alone. Such groups are also more reliable and consistent than individuals in how they process information. As a result, they are often found to be better at formulating solutions to problems. Knowledge, thinking, and critical judgment are pooled.

In the programs we studied, youth pooled not only their memories but their newly developing meta-cognitive skills. They used these skills to work together on the difficult tasks of value development in a complicated world.

IV. Constructive Processes of Value Work

Each weekly 2-hour session at SisterHood was focused on a challenging topic: reproductive rights, discrimination, fathers, lying, anger, and dealing with stress, among others.

Our observer described how youth freely shared intimate experiences and feelings. They also expressed sharp differences, for example, on gay-lesbian relationships, sex for pleasure, and the demeaning stereotypes that the African Americans held of Africans. Youth sometimes stood up, gesticulating to express their views. Yet these conversations readily shifted from serious discussion to humor, and then back again. Youth described their processes of value development occurring within this give and take.

We chose SisterHood as a central illustration because it was (with one exception that we mention later, Faith in Motion) the program in which youth's work was most directed focused on values. But we saw similar value development in the other programs as youth worked on arts and leadership projects, and we will include some examples. We will also bring in observations from Erica Halverson's (2009) analysis of a set of theater programs in which the youth were engaged in constructive value work.

Across these programs we identified three interrelated processes through which youth described prosocial value change.

Opening Themselves Up: Constructing the Moral Realities of Others

The first was a process of "opening up," discovering new moral realities beyond their own. This occurred through an active process of listening, understanding, and coming to empathize with the personal experiences of others. At SisterHood, Chantel, an African American, described how her moral perspective was changed by taking in the African youth's family stories. She made it sound clandestine: *"You don't know what people do behind closed doors. You can only find that out if they are willing to tell you. So discussing all of that kind of opens you up."* She reported opening herself to people from different cultures and nationalities: *"to everybody else that you're not used to being around."* Across programs youth described how

hearing and discussing other's experiences in a safe and trusting context allowed them to overcome stereotypes and discover the humanity of others. Straight youth described coming to understand the subjective worlds of GLBT youth, farm kids to the experiences of "punks," and youth from different religions and social classes to those of each other (Larson et al., 2004; Watkins et al., 2007). Through listening and actively piecing together the narrative strands of others' lives, these lives became vivid, authentic, and morally significant.

This discovery process, we believe, was aided by the youth's new metacognitive skills, including those for perspective taking and biographical reasoning. Opening oneself up is a constructive process. These new potentials enable teens to perform abstract mental operations to understand how others' lives shape who they are now (Habermas, 2011). Chantel described coming to understand how past experiences shaped what the African youth thought and felt. Youth used their new skills for biographical reasoning to understand how formative experiences, parents, and culture influence each other's moral beliefs and actions. These metacognitive skills helped them expand their circle of moral inclusivity.

But this was not just a dry cognitive process. It often involved emotion, including empathizing with others' experiences of pain and hardship. Baumeister et al. (2007) describe how emotions can serve an important developmental function by directing attention to the causes of the emotion and then stimulating analyses that influence future emotion and behavior. Chernise recounted exactly this process at SisterHood. The interviewer asked her to explain what accounted for the greater sense of civic responsibility she described gaining from the program. Chernise then described their experience watching videos in which people had been treated unfairly – in one case, news footage from an incident in which White vigilantes dragged an African American man to death behind a pickup truck. These experiences she said, "*make us*

upset, we cry and we cry as a group.” But the group then discussed the roots of what they felt, in this case the pernicious prejudice against people of African descent in the U.S. Chernise said these emotions and the subsequent discussions made her want to speak up in the future when she witnessed acts of racism. She was developing moral emotional sensibilities.

Youth often drew on their own experiences as a tool for these empathic processes. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989) describes how empathy with someone from a different culture is catalyzed by discovery of comparable emotional experiences. Donato at Youth Action reported this empathetic breakthrough in listening and talking with GBLT youth. He discovered how similar their experiences of prejudice were to his as a Mexican American. This discovery, he said, made him stop making gay jokes and start challenging peers who did. Other youth described these breakthroughs in hearing about the humiliation, anger, absurdity, and joys people experienced in different life situations (Watkins et al., 2007). They discovered that these “others” are not just objective abstractions; they are living, breathing, feeling human beings. Their values and actions had been wrought by powerful experiences, deserving of moral respect.

Collective Analysis

The process of active “opening up” included more than individual epiphanies. It involved deliberative processes of collective analysis. Youth discussed each other’s stories, asked questions, compared, challenged, and critiqued the basis for different value positions. Chernise summarized the deliberative process the group used at SisterHood to discuss powerful issues like the video in which the man was dragged to death:

We just speak on it and try to come up with different solutions... We talk about it and ask questions like, “Why does this happen?” ... We just go around the group, one by one and

we say our different opinions and then like, if we want, to further someone else's opinion to our opinion, or ask questions why we feel this way.

Youth drew conclusions by evaluating and building on the pool of information and arguments offered by the group. In interviews, they attributed their value changes to comparing value positions, defending their opinions, “talking it out,” and combining their different perspectives.

A frequent topic of youth's collective deliberations at SisterHood was their parents and their parents' traditional values. K'sea, whose parents came from Ghana, said of her father:

I kind of see him as an individual who is stuck on traditions and the whole Ghana tradition and a lot of stuff like that. But other people telling me about their experiences with their fathers made me appreciate what he does.

By comparing her experiences with others' (including joking about their parents' strange ways), K'sea said she came to have a more accepting understanding of her father and his firmly held values. Similarly, in her first interview Bernita expressed dissonance because her mother (from Cameroon) “*doesn't want anything to do with America.*” But she later described coming to understand and become more accepting of her mother's values and worldview, partly because she was able to hear insider reports on American parents. She explained: “*People got to see how my mom was, and I got to see how – to compare.*” Just as youth came to see diverse peers as moral entities, they came to see parents through deliberative analysis. They opened their value frameworks to encompass wider perspectives.

Again we suggest that the new cognitive skills of adolescence are at work. These youth appeared to be using their new skills to examine the assumptions behind value positions, analyze the parents' value systems, and modify their own value constructions to be more inclusive.

Perhaps the most challenging value work is dealing with people's negative views of one's own group (Phinney & Kohatsu, 1997). We have already discussed how youth at SisterHood talked through their reactions to a horrifying video of an African American being dragged to death. In research on youth theater programs, Halverson (2009) describes a more structured deliberative process of value work through which youth from marginalized groups addressed these issues. This process began with each youth bringing in an autobiographical or other story related to a focal topic youth had selected. Focal topics included immigration, racial discrimination and being gay in America. The youth then identified and analyzed the underlying elements of episodes that cut across their separate stories, including both positive experiences (the strengths of immigrant families) and negative experiences (episodes that typify prejudices or how their group is perceived in the majority society). In the next step the youth selected, reshaped, and fused these stories into a collective script that, for example, addressing the challenges faced by immigrant Mexican youth in the U.S. These scripts often contained *counter-narratives* in which patterns of prejudice were exposed and that positioned the youth as moral agents. This deliberative process, Halverson reports, allows youth to critique different value positions, including negative representations of themselves. It also allows them to recast these representations in the final script in ways that articulated values. As in the programs we studied, emotions contributed to this deliberative process, and were shaped by it.

These collective analyses had some resemblance to the collective peer processes that Piaget described. But in addition to logic, youth were employing cultural reasoning that considered value positions in relationship to multiple moral codes. Often youth's analyses led them to syntheses of parents' and others' values. Youth were constructing hybrid moral sensibilities.

Enactment

The first two peer processes in the youth's value work involved thinking and feeling. The third process entailed enactment of values in a social arena. This is an important step. To be meaningful, values have to survive the test of being operationalized in real-life contexts. Indeed, research shows that values are as likely to *follow from actions* as they are to produce actions (Allen & Antonishak, 2008). Our data suggested the two worked together: that youth refined values through practice.

One way youth did this was through addressing with real-world dilemmas. Members of SisterHood confronted one of these dilemmas when several members had not sold the group-agreed-upon quota of candy for their fundraiser. This was hard because it was a breach of trust within the group. (In one case, a girl sold her quota however her parents had found the money and used it to buy food.) But after much deliberation they decided they had to be firm, and stick to their initial decision to exclude people from their final retreat if they had not done their part. Cassandra said they had learned how important it is to talk directly to the people involved, rather than ignoring the problem, or using it as an excuse to not do their own part. Real-life situations like this required youth to learn the pragmatics of applying values to complex contexts.

Youth also reported value development from practicing sticking up for their values and beliefs. Jade at SisterHood described the youth's interactions in the program "as a test for the real world." It was a chance to practice and learn how to deal with people of different races and religions. Quite a number of youth in the activism programs we studied described learning to "speak up" for their values, for example, learning to stand up against bigotry with peers (Watkins et al., 2007) or to lobby public officials for a cause they believed in (Larson & Angus, 2011). This process of standing up for values was also important in the theater and film programs

described by Halverson (2009). By enacting stories that identified injustices and expressed their values, youth were articulating their beliefs to an audience.

Enactment moves one from possessing abstract values to taking stances as a moral actor. Youth learned to express and manage their values in the face of disagreement and stigmatization.

V. Co-Constructing Values in a Heterogeneous World

Peers, we have argued, can provide a powerful crucible for youth's work of constructing positive values in a world of diverse value systems. When conditions are right, peers can work effectively together to sort through arguments, emotions, moral priorities, and prejudices – and develop prosocial values applied to the complex situations of daily life.

In this final section, we first review the peer-driven processes that we described and ask how they might be similar or different across cultural contexts that have different norms for peer behavior. Second, we consider the role of institutions, such as youth programs, in facilitating peer value work: How might the processes and their outcomes vary as a function of different institutional philosophies and staff practices?

The Power of Peers and How It Might Vary Across Cultures

Researchers examining how peers contribute to adolescent value change have typically looked for simple mechanisms – imitation, conformity, modeling – *unidirectional* influences from peers to youth.⁴ But peer influence, Brown et al. (2008) argue, almost always entails transactional processes; often multiple processes operate simultaneously.

Our analyses – based primarily on American programs – suggest how peer groups can employ such transactional processes for constructive value development. Youth mobilize their new capacities for perspective taking to expand their understanding of and empathy for people

⁴ This search for simple causes, Brown et al. (2008) suggest, is because the statistical techniques available to quantitative researchers constrain them from testing more complex bilateral relationships.

different from themselves. They draw on their new meta-cognitive skills to compare, contrast and challenge. They try out values on each other. Over time, we suggest, these iterative transactions build “constructive webs” of integrated and operative values adapted to the situations of their lives.

These co-creative peer processes, we argue, are especially suited to the challenges of coming of age in a heterogeneous world. Decades of research has shown that the work done by effective small group entails broadband, eclectic processes (Magen & Mangiardi, 2005). In our view, this eclecticism is exactly what makes them valuable in a complex world. Peer processing helped youth to do *cross-paradigm work*. In our examples, youth listened to and opened themselves to emotionally-charged stories from unfamiliar frameworks. They allowed each other to hold and express different value positions. They pooled their collective experiences to analyze the diverse situational, biographical, and cultural contexts of value issues. They worked separately (parallel processing) and together to wrestle with the vexing contradictions of a complex society.

But how prevalent are these constructive peer processes beyond the limited set of the mostly American contexts we have considered? At a general level, we can point to numerous examples of co-constructive peer value work across the world, including outside adult-structured institutions. One can think of the many virtual peer groups flourishing on social networking sites that, at least in some instances, allow youth to do positive value work (e.g., Tynes, 2007). As we were finishing this article in early 2011, youth in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, and other Middle Eastern countries used social media for collective information-sharing, analysis, and planning coordinated political protest. Other examples of these co-constructive processes include young people’s development of local genres of Hip Hop as vehicles to explore values (Mitchell, 2001)

and their development of faith communities that help them navigate between a religious heritage and contemporary life (Freeman, 2009).⁵

It is essential, however, to consider cultural and other factors that might alter, facilitate, or inhibit these constructive peer dynamics. These factors include differences in the normative structure of peer groups (e.g., how equal vs. hierarchical relationships are) and the normative functions of such group – what youth expect to happen in peer interactions. Let us speculate on how these might influence the three constructive processes we identified.

Opening up. We first observed a process through which youth actively listened to and opened themselves up to differing moral realities. Might this process be different (or less frequent) in cultures in which norms for peer relationships differ? American peer norms encourage individual initiative, imaginative activities, and self-expression – types of behavior that might be necessary to this process. Yet Chen, Chung, and Hsiao (2009) cite findings suggesting that these three types of behavior are less normative among peers in Latin America, Africa, and East Asia than in the North America. They suggest that in China, for example, the cultural emphasis on social harmony, modesty, and self-control discourages individual expression. Such factors might well inhibit the sharing of personal feelings and stories that appeared to be integral to the processes at SisterHood⁶. Chen (2011), however, also finds that the norms for peer relationships in China are changing in ways that reward self-assertion and self-expression – which leads to many provocative questions.

Collective analysis. We also found that constructive processes at SisterHood and other American programs included comparing, talking out, and analyzing topics (such as the different

⁵ These illustrations, of course, do not address the unanswered question of how frequent different co-constructive processes are across nations or in peer interactions within or outside of adult-structured institutions.

⁶ It is also worth noting that, the peer group has a less prominent place in the lives of Asian than North American youth. Less time is spent with peers (Larson & Verma, 1999) and they are found to be less dependent on peers for self-validation (Chen et al., 2009). Thus they may be less motivated to turn to peers for value work.

values of their parents). Research shows that peer norms in East Asian cultures place a high emphasis on prosocial cooperative behavior (Chen et al., 2009). This suggests the hypothesis that, under the right conditions, Asian youth might be *more* capable than American youth of working together on this type of analytic value work.

Enactment. Third, we observed a process in which youth developed values by trying them out with each other and sometimes with people outside the program. Cultural differences in social initiative and self-expression might influence whether and how this process might play out across contexts. Cultures may also differ in the opportunities and encouragement they provide for youth to try out new value positions, especially with adults.

This discussion is highly speculative. Research is needed; and we should be prepared to be surprised. There may be *entirely different processes* – as well as outcomes – in different cultural contexts as a product of differing norms for peer interactions, as well as social conditions that influence peer interactions (e.g., a history of conflict between ethnic groups). But the potential power of peers as a catalyst of positive value development should not be ignored.

The Role of Institutional Philosophies and Professional Practices

We cannot close without questioning how the peer processes described here were shaped within an institutional context, youth programs. This brings in another level of analysis at which culture matters. Most youth programs have a deliberate mission of influencing young people's values. But they differ widely, between and within nations, in the approaches they use; many see their mission as inculcating a fixed set of cultural values (Alvarez, 1994). It is important to consider how these different approaches are related to value processes and outcomes, including how well they prepare youth for a heterogeneous global world. These are applied questions, but also questions that need the critical eye of theorists and researchers.

The processes of value co-construction that we described at SisterHood and other American programs were embedded within a philosophy of “youth-led” programming (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). This philosophy stresses giving youth agency, choice, and “voice” – both as individuals and as a group. In a Western context, it is rooted in cultural beliefs (ala Montessori, Dewey, Piaget, etc.) that educators should support young people as the producers of their own development. To be clear, this does not mean that program leaders abdicate authority. Instead, they led from behind. At Sisterhood Lynn and Janet helped youth formulate their own rules, which facilitated youth’s formation of mutual trust and other critical conditions for constructive work. They also primed youth’s value work by showing films and arranging field trips that challenged youth. Lynn and Janet wanted them to experience ownership of the discussions that followed, so they often stood back. Yet, as described by Bernita, *“They take the lead at the right time, like when the group needs that kind of authority to get them going or stay on track or topic.”* By leading from behind these and other leaders helped create conditions for and keep youth engaged in the processes of active listening, analysis, and enactment.

A youth-led philosophy is not unique to Western cultures or nations. It can be found in youth programs across the world, and is acknowledged by the United Nations (Alvarez, 1994; Lansdown, 2001). One prominent example is peace education programs, which have a youth-led philosophy coupled with a focus on the type of value work we have described (Ardizzone, 2002). These have often been developed locally in response to conflicts between groups (e.g., in Israel/Palestine, Latin America, Sierre Leone, and South Africa), with the goal of cultivating mutual understanding among youth. Like at SisterHood, the adult advisors of these programs support honest and open communication between youth. Youth work together to share personal

experiences, raise difficult value issues (e.g., injustice, oppression), and analyze assumptions and fears (Norman, 2009).

But a youth-led program philosophy is hardly universal. Many programs across nations are adult-structured and adult-led (Alvarez, 1994). We are aware of no global survey of youth programs, but it is likely that this philosophy is more frequent in cultural contexts where the norms for youth-educator relationships emphasize interpersonal hierarchy and respect for elders (Saraswathi, Mistry, & Dutta, 2010; Serpell & Hatano, 1997). Different processes of peer value work can be expected under this philosophy.

Within our study of American programs, there was one program, “Faith in Motion,” that provides an illustration of the peer processes under a more adult-led approach. The leaders were deliberate in inculcating prosocial, evangelical Christian values. They often led activities from the front of the room, and peer dynamics among the mixed-race youth were directed in ways that reinforced adult-prescribed values, religious submission, and collective harmony. For example, rather than encouraging youth to analyze racial prejudice, they told youth that they were “all equal under God” and that the ethnic/racial differences between them did not matter. Activities were structured to encourage cooperation among all, and from our vantage point, appeared to be quite successful in cultivating positive peer interactions and prosocial values.

Yet adult-led philosophies are typically justified as providing youth a secure grounding in an existing value system. It is important to ask whether (and how) this approach can be formulated to help young people learn to adapt on their own as they encounter new and diverse value systems. We argue that peer processes that are youth-led (while being adult-guided) may be better suited to the cross-paradigm value work required to understand, critique, and develop moral sensibilities for this diversity.

The options, of course, are never so simple as one approach versus another. There are many permutations to program philosophy, and many possible adaptations to differing cultural contexts, groups of youth, and goals. Johnson, Johnson-Pynn, and Pynn (2007) describe a rapidly growing environmental youth activism program in China that combines traditional Chinese Buddhist and Taoist notions of oneness and selflessness, with an emphasis on social justice and an operational philosophy that is more democratic and youth-led than the traditional Chinese leadership style. Of course programs may also differ in the importance they give to different value priorities (e.g., to self, community, and deity).

Further inquiry is needed on how these and other variations in institutional approaches shape peer processes of value development. Piaget's optimism that peer interactions inevitably lead to the development of prosocial values is unwarranted. There is strong consistent evidence that, even within organized programs, certain groups of adolescent peers teach each other anti-social rather than prosocial behavior (Dodge et al., 2006; Stattin et al., 2005). Evidence also suggests that well-meaning programs aimed at bridging large divides between youth from hostile groups (such as between Israeli and Palestine youth) can fail to do so (Hammack, 2006). Research can help identify practices that are effective in facilitating constructive peer value work with different groups of youth and under a range of different program and cultural conditions. There is a wide world of variations in positive peer developmental processes to be explored.

Acknowledgements.

We would like to give special thanks to the youth and program staff who shared their experiences with us, especially those in SisterHood. We are also indebted to Kevin Thomas, Andrew Tonachel, and many others. Finally, we thank the William T. Grant Foundation for their generous funding of this research.

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