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# A Critical-Positive Youth Development Model for Intervening With Minority Youth at Risk for Delinquency

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Minority youths who experience adversity in the forms of concentrated poverty, neighborhood violence, and social marginalization are at increased risk for delinquency. Yet, traditional approaches to reducing delinquency do not typically account for these social-structural risk factors. This article proposes a model of intervening that was developed to address this limitation. The current model was informed by the findings of a 9-month ethnography of a leadership development program for African American youths as well as positive youth development and critical theory frameworks. It delineates the roles of key intervention features in enhancing important assets among minority youths that help them to better navigate adverse social-structural conditions, decrease problem behaviors, and increase prosocial behaviors.

***Public Policy Relevance Statement***
Interventions for minority youth offenders typically do not account for social-structural risk factors for delinquency including poverty and social marginalization. This study outlines a model of intervention that aims to enhance the capacity of minority youths to navigate these adverse conditions while reducing problem behaviors and increasing prosocial behaviors.



Racial minority youths who live in low-income urban communities (LUC) are exposed to social and structural factors that increase their risk for delinquent behavior (Day, Ji, DuBois, Silverthorn, & Flay, 2016; Ginwright & James, 2002). Concentrated poverty, unemployment, and violence have been shown to be associated with problem behaviors such as truancy, substance use, and assault (Gatti, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 2009; Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention, 2015; Ou & Reynolds, 2010). In addition, minority youths who are sanctioned by the juvenile justice system often experience discrimination due to their race *and* offender status, which can contribute to subsequent offending (Case & Hunter, 2014; Gilman, Hill, & Hawkins, 2015). In conceptualizing delinquency as an end-point in a causal chain, Schepers (2016) described these social-structural inequalities as the "cause of the causes" of delinquency (p. 2).

Social-structural inequalities can also have pernicious consequences for the psychosocial development of minority youths from LUC. Most youth offenders "age-out" of delinquency, meaning that they do not continue problem behaviors into adulthood (Sampson & Laub, 2003). One national report found that 66% of youths who had offended in their midteens had desisted by later adolescence (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). However, for minority youths in LUC, the path to responsible adulthood is more tenuous. This population often lacks key community facilitators of healthy development such as employment opportunities, connections to positive institutions (e.g., school), and access to youth programs (Balsano, 2005; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Gatti, Tremblay, & Larocque, 2003; Ginwright & James, 2002). Moreover, the connections this group has to community assets are often fragile. For instance, a recent longitudinal study found that perceptions of racial discrimination in school weakened the sense of attachment 9- and 12-year-old African American students had to their schools and their education (Unnever, Cullen, & Barnes, 2015).

For minority youths from LUC who come in contact with the juvenile justice system, there is an array of supports and services that are intended to "rehabilitate" them (Mendel, 2011). These interventions vary considerably in approach and may be offered in juvenile correctional facilities or through community-based programs. In Lipsey's (2009) meta-analysis of effective interventions, the author identified seven distinct approaches that guide juvenile justice interventions (see Table 1). With the exception of job skill-building programs, these approaches do not explicitly address social-structural factors that increase delinquency risk. Moreover, most juvenile justice interventions have little empirical support for their effectiveness or have been shown to exacerbate delinquent behavior (Henggeler &

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**Table 1.** *Types of Juvenile Offender Interventions*

| Types | Description |
|---|---|
| Surveillance | Youth closely monitored as in probation or parole. |
| Deterrence | Youth observes the negative consequences of problem behaviors (e.g., "scared-straight" programs). |
| Discipline | Youth learns discipline through structured activities (e.g., boot camps). |
| Restorative | Youth repairs the harm caused by their offending behaviors. This may include providing financial compensation to victims, performing community service, or apologizing to victims. |
| Counseling | Youth engages in a helping relationship with a responsible adult or group of peers (e.g., individual or family counseling, mentoring). |
| Skill-building | Youth gains an enhanced capacity to control their behavior and skills to successfully engage in prosocial normative behaviors such as maintaining employment (e.g., Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, social skills training, job training and placement). |
| Multiple coordinated services | Youth provided with an individualized and targeted set of services and supports (e.g., case management). |

*Note*. Adapted from Lipsey, 2009, pp. 133–135. Copyright 2009 by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Schoenwald, 2011; Holman & Ziedenberg, 2006). Iatrogenic interventions include incarceration in correctional facilities, which juvenile justice reform advocates argue is developmentally disruptive because youths are removed from the contexts that support their development (Fazal, 2014; Mendel, 2011).

Although many intervention approaches fail to attend to social-structural risk factors and developmental barriers experienced by minority youths from LUC, theoretical frameworks that address these limitations do exist. For example, positive youth development (PYD) emphasizes fostering assets (e.g., skills, knowledge) among youths that assist their progression to responsible adulthood (Benson, 1997; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). As another case in point, critical theory stresses the importance of empowering youths to engage with their communities and challenge the social-structural inequalities embedded within them (Ginwright & James, 2002; Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). Interventions informed by tenets of these frameworks have shown promise. Lipsey (2009) found that skills-building interventions like job programs were among the most effective approaches. Zagar, Busch, and Hughes (2009) similarly found that among youths age 14 to 21, job training and community service interventions were the most effective. Thus, there is need and promise for models of intervening that address the challenges and barriers faced by minority youths from LUC. This article outlines one such model that blends positive youth development and critical theory frameworks and was developed from an ethnography of an intervention for African American youths at risk for delinquency.

## Positive Youth Development

Historically, adolescence has been conceptualized as a developmental period in which youths exhibit vulnerabilities to a variety of problems such as antisocial conduct and substance abuse (Damon, 2004). Positive youth development emerged as a reaction to this seemingly deficit perspective on adolescence. A strengths-based developmental approach, it asserts that all youths have the potential to thrive and aims to identify and foster factors associated with thriving (Damon, 2004). Thriving factors, variably known as strengths, assets, or attributes have been shown to be inversely related to problem behaviors including substance use, aggressive behavior, and violence (Beets et al., 2009; Catalano et al., 2004; Lerner & Lerner, 2011; Lewis et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2010). From this perspective, enhancing key assets in youths is a viable approach to reducing delinquency while fostering healthy development.

Several frameworks have emerged to identify important individual and contextual assets in healthy development (Benson, 1997; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). For instance, scholars have proposed that PYD is comprised of five key individual attributes (The Five C's), and more recently introduced a sixth attribute, *contribution*, that is theorized to emerge when the other five are present (Eccles & Gottman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunnn, 2003; Table 2). Findings across several studies reveal inverse associations between these attributes and substance use (e.g., alcohol), conduct problems (e.g., fighting) and emotional problems (Erdem, DuBois, Larose, De Wit, & Lipman, 2016; Jelicic, Bobek, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2007). In terms of contextual facilitators of healthy development, Search Institute documented several "external assets" (see Benson, 1997; Table 2). Findings suggest that youths with more external assets are less likely to report engaging in risky behaviors and more likely to report engaging in prosocial behaviors (Erdem et al., 2016; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000).

In sum, PYD posits that healthy development involves an alignment of individual *and* contextual assets (Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007). Moreover, research suggests that the promotion of these assets is also associated with decreased delinquent behaviors. This implies that enhancing individual and contextual assets can be a developmentally appropriate approach to intervening with minority youths from LUC who are at risk for delinquency.

## Critical Theory

Frameworks informed by critical theory share PYD's focus on youth assets; however, they depart from PYD and prominent intervention approaches in their emphasis on understanding and transforming social-structural barriers to thriving that are faced by minority youths in LUC (Ginwright & James, 2002; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013; Watts et al., 2003). Consequently, the core assumption of critical theory is that the capacity of minority youths to *act* in the face of social-structural inequalities is a crucial developmental asset, one worthy of developing through intervention (Watts et al., 2003). Some theorists conceptualize this capability as *empowerment* (Pearrow &

**Table 2.** *Important Concepts in Positive Youth Development*

| Concept | Definition |
|---|---|
| | Individual Assets |
| Competence | A positive evaluation of one's abilities in domain specific areas including cognitive (e.g., decision making), social (e.g., conflict resolution), academic (e.g., school grades and attendance), and vocational (e.g., work habits) |
| Confidence | A positive sense of self-worth and self-efficacy |
| Connection | Positive bonds with people and social institutions including family, school, and community |
| Character | A sense of morality and integrity reflected in respect for authority and social and cultural norms |
| Caring and Compassion | A sense of empathy and sympathy for others |
| Contribution | Having a positive influence on one's family and community |
| | Contextual/External Assets |
| Supportive environments | Support given through family, neighborhood, or school |
| Empowerment | Opportunities and roles for youth to be involved in their community |
| Boundaries and expectations | Clear rules and consequences from family and school; positive influences from peers and adults |
| Constructive use of time | Opportunities for youth to be engaged in positive activities |

*Note*. Adapted from Lerner et al. (2005), p. 23. Copyright 2005 from Sage Publications. Adapted from Benson (1997). Copyright 1997 from John-Wiley and Sons, Inc.



Pollack, 2009; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999), a process that involves youths' "gaining control and mastery within the social, economic, and political contexts of their lives in order to improve equity and quality of life" (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 32). Empowerment consists of three components. It involves youths: (a) understanding the social-political factors that impact their lives (i.e., critical consciousness); (b) believing that they can enact change in their lives; and (c) engaging in change-related action (Zimmerman, 2000).

Critical consciousness among youths can be fostered through their involvement in *counterspaces* (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013). A counterspace is a social setting that challenges deficit-based societal notions concerning a marginalized group (Case & Hunter, 2012). Such settings include school or community organizations, faith settings, and social networks. Counterspaces help minority youths maintain positive self-concepts in the face of social denigration (Case & Hunter, 2014). Research suggests that youths who are sanctioned by the juvenile justice system are labeled "bad" kids by society (Bernburg, 2006; Bernburg & Krohn, 2003) and, if internalized, this label may lower self-esteem and increase the likelihood of future offense (Bernburg, 2006; Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; Case & Hunter, 2012). However, being involved in counterspaces provides a means for youths to forge "counter-identities" that assert their worth, potential, and place in the world (Case & Hunter, 2014).

Beliefs regarding one's competence have been extensively studied through the construct of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that one can succeed at achieving goals through one's actions (Bandura, 1989). The second component in individual empowerment, it is a key precursor of motivation, affect, and of the third component of empowerment: action. The research literature confirms self-efficacy's centrality in behavioral change, from smoking cessation to condom use and political participation (Gwaltney, Metrik, Kahler, & Schiffman, 2009; Oppong, Osafu, & Doku, 2016; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009; Zimmerman, 2000).

Action in service to youth empowerment takes the form of civic or community engagement. From a critical perspective, community engagement refers to actions through which disadvantaged youths "contest, challenge, respond, and negotiate the use and misuse of power in their lives" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 87). In this sense, community engagement activities can range from political organizing and protest to participating in activities meant to increase a community's capacity to respond to the needs of residents (e.g., organizing town hall meetings; conducting research; volunteering with service organizations).

Interventions that empower youths provide an affirming environment (i.e., counterspace) and opportunities for competence development (e.g., vocational, community leadership), knowledge acquisition, and community engagement (Jennings et al., 2006; Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013). There are some documented examples of these programs being used to intervene with youths at risk for delinquent behavior. The YouthBuild Offender Project (YBOP), for example, provides job training and employment, counseling, leadership development training, and opportunities for community engagement to at-risk 16- to 24-year-old youths (Cohen & Piquero, 2010). Comparing program graduates with a nonparticipating cohort over 31 months, Cohen and Piquero (2010) found that graduates were less likely than nonparticipants to receive a conviction, have their parole revoked, or be incarcerated (28.3% vs. 33.3%).

In sum, critical theory takes a social justice approach to intervening with minority youths from LUC. Specifically, it recognizes that social-structural factors can inhibit healthy development and increase delinquency risk. In addition, critical theory emphasizes the importance of empowering youths to recognize social-structural inequalities and engage in social action to increase their opportunities and life chances. These social justice objectives are met when interventions foster critical consciousness, self-efficacy and community engagement.

## Informing Model Development: The Peer Ambassadors Program

> You can tell youth that they are powerful or you can have them experience their power.
>
> —Jamie, Executive Director, Peer Ambassadors

The present model was developed as part of an ethnographic investigation of a youth program, Peer Ambassadors (Case & Hunter, 2014). Model components were observed in the program's

features. Hypothesized associations between features and youth outcomes are supported by the study's findings and research on PYD and critical theory (Case & Hunter, 2014). It is important to note that while critical theory emphasizes both individual and social-structural change, the focus of this model is on achieving favorable individual-level outcomes (i.e., decrease in problem behaviors and increase in prosocial behaviors and community involvement). However, this model attends to higher-level factors by specifying how an intervention can empower minority youths to overcome social-structural inequalities and position them to engage in efforts to transform those inequalities.

Peer Ambassadors (PA) was a leadership development program that targeted African American youths between the ages of 10 and 19 who had prior involvement with the juvenile justice system or who were otherwise identified as at risk for such involvement (e.g., having severe behavioral problems in school; Case & Hunter, 2014). Participation in the program was voluntary and not court-mandated. Youths were recommended or referred to the program by a concerned peer, family member, school personnel, or mental health provider. Program participants exhibited a range of problem behaviors including assault, drug possession, carrying a weapon to school, running away from home, and truancy (Case & Hunter, 2014).

Consistent with a PYD and critical theory emphasis, the program pursued individual and social-structural objectives (Case & Hunter, 2014). The individual goals for participants were to (a) reduce problem behaviors (e.g., drug use, fighting, truancy); (b) increase prosocial behaviors (e.g., attending school, completing assignments, and being involved in the workforce); (c) increase capacity to successfully navigate challenging situations (e.g., coping and advocacy skills); and (d) foster leadership skills. The aspirational social-structural goals were to increase system (e.g., education, mental health) responsiveness to the needs of disadvantaged youths and increase avenues for youths to be involved in their communities. This would be accomplished as participants became youth leaders who could help catalyze social changes.

In pursuit of program goals, PA adhered to an approach that the executive director described as "intervention by doing" (Case & Hunter, 2014). Intervention by doing assumes that positive youth outcomes (i.e., decrease in problem behaviors/increase in prosocial behaviors and community engagement) occur as youths become meaningfully engaged in their communities (Case & Hunter, 2014). The program's focus on community engagement reflected a recognition of structural impediments to positive outcomes among minority youths from LUC such as a lack of youth programming, employment, and opportunities to be engaged in community life. It also reflected the reality that PA did not "treat" youths in a psychotherapeutic sense. Rather, the program's philosophy was that structured community engagement would empower youths by providing important roles and opportunities to acquire important knowledge and life skills that would lead to positive outcomes. As the program's executive director described, the program, "attempts to build assets [and] promote resiliency and lots of community engagement."

Intervention by doing was chiefly facilitated by the program being youth-led. Youths had considerable voice in their community engagement; they were full partners with staff in carrying out activities to improve opportunities for youths in their communities (Case & Hunter, 2014). These included presenting workshops on decision making to youths incarcerated at the local juvenile detention center and conducting focus groups with these youths to identify service gaps and needed resources. Youths presented findings and recommendations from their focus groups at national conferences and before local service provider committees with the hope of informing policy. Youths also facilitated town hall meetings on a number of pertinent topics including limited summer employment opportunities for youths and rising high school dropout rates. Some youths were even invited to sit on steering committees for a systems of care initiative and to represent youths to local social services entities. As compensation for their community engagement, youths received a semimonthly stipend from the community mental health board (Case & Hunter, 2014).

Positive outcomes were observed among the youths who participated in PA. Of the nearly 30 youths who participated over the program's 6-year existence, all but one graduated high school or completed a GED and more than 90% enrolled in a college or university. In addition, all of the youths who remained in the program for at least two years completed at least one advanced placement (AP) course. While some participants had subsequent contact with the juvenile justice system, none to date have entered the adult criminal justice system.

## Method

The investigation of PA that informed the development of the present model occurred over a 9-month period and involved interviews and observations of staff and youths (Case & Hunter, 2014). The initial report of this study identified features of PA that helped the program function as a counterspace that fostered positive self-concepts among youths who experienced marginalization due to their race and offender status. In contrast, the current report highlights features of PA that may contribute to positive youth outcomes more broadly. That said, there is overlap between reports. Some program assets identified by this report were highlighted in the previous publication (i.e., counterspace and supportive relationships). In addition, positive self-concepts, which was highlighted in the previous report, is a component of the present model. To delineate findings from the initial and present studies, previously reported findings, quotes, and observations are cited.

During the study, there were nine youths and two staff involved in the program. All youths and staff were observed, while three youths and both staff participants were interviewed (Case & Hunter, 2014). More youths indicated an interest in being interviewed but did not receive consent from their parents or guardians. Youth participants (two males and one female) had a mean age of 18 years and had been involved in the program for almost 3 years. Two reported having been incarcerated and two stated that they were enrolled in an alternative high school, while the other reported attending a community college (Case & Hunter, 2014). Staff had a mean age of 41 years and average length of involvement of 4 years. All youths and staff self-identified as Black or African American (Case & Hunter, 2014). Pseudonyms are used in this article to ensure participant confidentiality.

Observations that lasted 30 min to four hours were conducted during PA meetings and other programmatic activities. Semistructured interviews that lasted 50 min to 1.5 hours were conducted at venues of the participants' choosing. The youth interview protocol queried the general experiences of youths with the program and

perceived benefits of the program, and the staff protocol elicited information on the program model and philosophy (Case & Hunter, 2014).

The data analytic plan involved a thematic analysis of observations and interview transcripts (Case & Hunter, 2014). Transcripts were analyzed by a team of qualitative analysts that consisted of the author (a graduate student at the time) and five undergraduate students using a consensus approach. Each analyst independently reviewed each transcript to identify common themes across transcripts. The analysis team met weekly over three months to discuss these themes and arrive at a consensus on their meanings and significance. Observations translated into fieldnotes were analyzed by the author and integrated with findings from the interviews.

## Critical-Positive Youth Development Model of Intervention

The ethnography of PA, including its findings and my experiences with the program led to the evolution of the current model (see Figure 1). Framed within PYD and critical theory perspectives, this model consists of three core assumptions: (a) minority youths from LUC are embedded in disadvantaging social contexts that increase their risk for delinquency; (b) reductions in problem behaviors and increases in prosocial behaviors occur as youths develop important assets, chief of which is the ability to navigate and transform disadvantaging contexts; and (c) youths develop these assets via involvement in programs that facilitate community engagement.

This model posits three contextual assets or intervention features that foster youth assets. These contextual assets are (a) *empowering roles*, which are meaningful activities and responsibilities within an intervention; (b) *counterspace and counternarrative*, which are elements of a program that contest deficit-based and limiting views of minority youths; and (c) *supportive relationships,* which provide care and behavioral accountability. These contextual assets, through the mechanism of community engagement, support the development of key individual assets: *competence, confidence*, *connections*, and *contribution.* The presence of these individual assets is associated with a reduction in problem behaviors and increase in prosocial behaviors. In other words, individual assets mediate the relationships among contextual assets, community engagement, and favorable behavioral outcomes in youths.

## Empowering Roles

The first tenet of this model is that providing youths with meaningful roles in community engagement efforts fosters their competence and confidence, which in turn contribute to positive outcomes. An empowering role can be defined as a role that is highly visible and esteemed and provides "opportunities for skill development, skill utilization, and the exercise of responsibility and influence" (Maton, 2008, p. 12). Specifically, youths in PA occupied the role of social change agents in their community. They conducted research and workshops, planned outreach events, facilitated town hall meetings on important topics, and sat on service provision committees. Keisha, one of the participants, noted about this role: "Every idea, every event, every planning day is youth. We do it all. Jamie just do the money, maybe some ideas bounce off Jamie, and, support. But everything we do as far as facilitation is all youth."

**Competence.** Youths reported that as they functioned as social change agents they gained important skills and knowledge. They learned how to speak publicly, work as a team, lead others, and advocate for their needs. They also stated that these skills and knowledge assisted them in multiple life domains. Keisha, for example, highlighted how being involved in PA helped her become more knowledgeable and resourceful in relation to her community:

> I was not resourceful for myself at all until I got to Peer Ambassadors. . . . It [PA] helps you be resourceful. Champaign is very

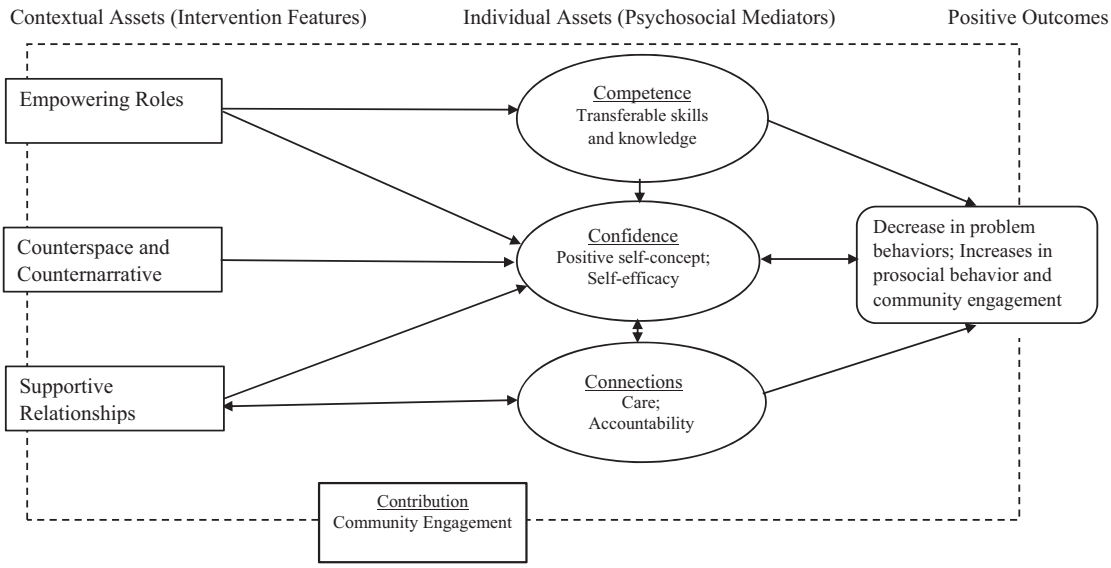


***Figure 1.*** Critical-Positive Youth Development Model for Intervening with Minority Youth from Low-Income Urban Communities.

> resource-full, but not a lot of parents and youth know where to go. And that was another thing Peer Ambassadors talked about—how to get them [youths and families] to resources on their own.

**Confidence.** In addition to providing opportunities for skill and knowledge development, empowering roles enhance youths' views of themselves, particularly their self-worth and self-efficacy. When asked how involvement in PA benefited them, youth in this study unanimously and emphatically stated that it provided a sense of "importance." Keisha, for example, stated,

> I was raised to stay in the child's place, but there's a time when a child's place isn't a child's place anymore. What I mean by that is you can be 16, 17, and 18 in Peer Ambassadors and you're not even considered in a child's place because of the *importance* . . . of whatever you do. (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 917)

Kevin expressed a similar sentiment. When the program acquired office space, youths were tasked with painting the walls and installing office computers. Kevin mentioned that these responsibilities led him to feel, "*Important* . . . it's just like having something to do. But in this case, it's like you're doing this and you're going to get recognition for it, so you feel important" (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 917).

The acquisition of new roles and skills can also enhance youths' self-efficacy. Kevin noted that the more refined his community engagement skills became, the more his self-efficacy grew and the more likely he was to engage in positive actions to improve his life:

> I realized a lot of things and learned a lot of stuff like how to act within a community, how to carry myself even better, how to speak out in public. . . . So, I learned that and the *confidence* to do that builds. So, you learn how to work . . . because when we do the events, we put on what we need to put on to look the part, be professional, and that's good. And as that *builds*, it's easier for us to go out and get the job we want or do the job they want, based on our experience. The little experiences as time goes by . . . that's gonna help me out.

In sum, this model postulates that empowering roles in community engagement contribute to positive outcomes among minority youth offenders. Specifically, these roles foster competence through the acquisition of life skills and knowledge. Empowering roles and the competence gained through them help enhance youths' sense of self-worth and self-efficacy (i.e., confidence). Over time, increased competence and confidence provide youths the motivation and capacity to reduce problem behaviors and increase prosocial behaviors.

## Counterspaces and Counternarratives

The second tenet of this model is that interventions that function as counterspaces assist youths in crafting positive self-concepts that are conducive to pro-social behavior. In the context of minority youth offenders, counterspaces challenge the deficit-based offender label. Anthony, a participant in PA, described the pernicious consequences of this label for African American youths:

> When you make a name for yourself, everybody's going to look at you like that. If they see your name, your face on the news, they treat you like a convict or something. . . . You cannot be an African American in this town and think you're going to be bad and make it through school. You're not going to get nothing in this community if you think you going to get out here, and first of all be Black and think you can act up and get away with stuff. (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 914)

**Confidence.** As a counterspace, PA contested the idea that youth participants were bad kids destined for a life of crime. Further, it helped forge positive self-concepts (Case & Hunter, 2014). As Jamie, the program's executive director, noted,

> It [PA] helps shape a different narrative. . . . So when Peer Ambassadors present in front of the school board, it's impressive, right? Because these are often the kids who get kicked out of their schools, and they [PAs] improvise a moment-in-time snapshot of possibility and potential. (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 914)

The program fostered the counternarrative that PA youths were not bad kids and that they had the potential to contribute positively to their community. Youths reported that this counternarrative led to the formation of a new identity: "PAs". As PAs, they understood themselves to be youths who carried out important work in their community and who were role models to other youths. This shift in identity was important for two reasons. First, it provided an escape from the bad kid label. Second, it provided new parameters around how the youths ought to behave.

Research findings on narrative identity work and empowering settings support the transformative potential of counternarratives. Opsal (2011) in her research on female parolees found that participants subverted the ex-felon label by anchoring their sense of self to their identities as mothers. Specifically, motherhood provided a positive sense of self-worth. Maton (2008) found that an affirming belief system in empowering settings such as Alcohol Anonymous and YouthBuild inspired change because it held that each member had the potential to achieve positive goals.

The present model proposes that for minority youths from LUC, the existence of a counterspace and counternarrative in an intervention contributes to positive outcomes. This arrangement challenges the deficit notions that these youths are likely to internalize about themselves and promotes confidence in the form of a positive self-concept. Indeed, these youths reported anchoring their sense of self and self-worth to their new identity as PAs. A positive self-concept that is consonant with prosocial ideals motivates prosocial behaviors.

## Supportive Relationships

The final tenet of this model is that a supportive relational environment in an intervention fosters positive connections and confidence among youths, which contributes to positive youth outcomes. Some scholars have argued that because of the stigma associated with the bad kid label, labeled youths find it difficult to forge relationships with youths who have not had contact with the juvenile justice system (Bernburg, 2006). As such, their default friendships tend to be with other labeled youths and these associations increase the likelihood of future problem behaviors. (Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; Gatti et al., 2009). However, the associations among youths in PA appeared to do the opposite. That is, these relationships supported prosocial behaviors.

**Connections.** Connections refer to positive bonds among individuals. The PA youths reported that the relationships they forged within the program could be described as caring. As An-

thony remarked, "I felt like somebody was caring about me. I had somebody that was caring for me. . . . Ain't too many times you get somebody to care for you" (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 915). The caring relationships among youths were not merely an artifact of their shared experiences and struggles. Rather, they were embedded in the social architecture of the program. During my first few observation sessions, I noticed a slogan in the main PA office space. It read, "**C**onfidentiality **A**ctive listening **R**espect **I**-Statements **N**o put-downs **G**ive equal time" (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 915). In subsequent observations, I observed the youths pointing to the slogan and challenging each other when someone deviated from the slogan's guidelines.

Supportive relationships among youths may also foster accountability around their behavior. In PA, this seemed to occur through two mechanisms. First, senior PAs (those who had been in the program for longer than a year) modeled appropriate behavior for junior PAs. Anthony identifies this dynamic in his recounting of his early involvement with PA: "I'm thinking to myself, like, all right, cool, I see they're doing good, maybe I can do good too." Second, for the youths in this study, being a PA provided youth offenders a counter identity as PAs. Youths perceived the PA identity as a highly esteemed identity within the community and one that required them to exhibit positive behaviors. Perhaps because the only other identity these youths had access to was the stigmatized bad kid identity, they were fiercely protective of the PA identity. As Keisha remarked,

> Your reputation outside of Peer Ambassadors can affect Peer Ambassadors. One thing I have learned throughout the years is how to be able to maintain myself outside of Peer Ambassadors so it will not affect how people look at me when I go into the community. (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 918)

Rory, a staff member, similarly concluded,

> When they do something at school or in the community . . . I think that they know they are held accountable by their peers, and I think [for] some of them also it clicks in their head that I cannot be a Peer Ambassador in the Peer Ambassador office and then be, you know, a different species in the community.

As the above quotes suggest, program participants were proactive in monitoring each other's behaviors to safeguard the legitimacy and integrity of the PA identity. Monitoring was as informal as encouraging each other to do the right thing in a given situation. There were also more formal forms of monitoring and accountability. For example, if a PA was suspended from school or incarcerated they had to go before their peers and explain the event in question. This occurred behind closed doors and only youths were present. After the accused made their case, their peers would deliberate. When the accused was found to be "in the wrong," their peers would recommend a sanction such as writing a letter of apology or suspension from the program. In the case of serious repeated transgressions, peers might recommend expulsion from the program. In essence, having a new and esteemed identity and being held accountable for one's actions by one's peers seemed to encourage prosocial behaviors. This proposition is consistent with findings that suggest having clear standards of behavior is a common factor across effective PYD programs (Catalano et al., 2004).

**Confidence.** Supportive relationships can also enhance confidence, particularly youths' sense of worthiness. The youths in PA described positive relationships with staff characterized by unconditional acceptance. As Keisha stated, "Even though we [PAs] were considered bad kids in society or in school, they [PA staff] looked at us different." (Case & Hunter, 2014, p. 914). Similarly, Anthony stated that "they [staff] just made me feel good about myself." In addition to impressing their worth, the youths reported that staff believed in their potential. Kevin, for instance, mentioned the "dedication that adults would have here knowing that we [PAs] have the ability to do what we could do."

In sum, this model posits that a supportive relational environment in a youth intervention fosters connections and confidence among youths. Connections communicate care and provide accountability around behavior, which contributes to prosocial behaviors and a reduction of problem behaviors. Supportive relationships also enhance confidence. They affirm youths' worth and potential, thus promoting a positive self-concept and self-efficacy. The connections and confidence provided through supportive relationships ultimately help reduce problem behaviors and increase prosocial ones.

## Discussion

This article offers a theoretically and empirically based model for reducing delinquency, particularly among minority youths from LUC. While most traditional intervention approaches target problem behaviors with minimal consideration of social and structural influences on delinquency and healthy development, this model accounts for such factors. In addition, it proposes specific intervention features that help youths respond adaptively to social-structural adversity in their lives. The emphasis on addressing social-structural risk is an important feature of the present model as research suggests that effective interventions target key risk factors in youths' lives (Henggeler & Schoenwald, 2011).

The current model blends two complementary perspectives on adolescence. Together, these perspectives form a strengths-based and social justice approach to promoting healthy development and reducing delinquency. The PYD perspective emphasizes youth thriving instead of dysfunction and youth strengths instead of deficiencies, as well as the necessity of contextual assets in positive youth outcomes (Benson, 1997; Damon, 2004). Critical theory highlights the social and structural challenges to healthy development encountered by minority youths from LUC (Ginwright & James, 2002). In addition, it emphasizes the need for social transformation to ensure healthy development and reduce delinquency. Last, it proposes empowerment as a key facilitator of minority youths' capacity to resist oppression, increase opportunities, and decrease social inequalities (Ginwright & James, 2002; Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013; Watts et al., 2003).

In addition to its sensitivity to the social ecology of minority youths from LUC, this blended model is promising because it reflects recent advances in our understanding of the interplay between adolescent development and delinquency. In particular, it is based on the assumption that the same factors that foster positive youth development can be enhanced to reduce delinquency (Catalano et al., 2004). As Zagar et al. (2009) argue, healthy development and delinquency prevention are two sides of the same coin. The current model proposes that specific intervention features

(empowering roles, counterspace and counternarrative, supportive relationships) and community engagement foster important developmental assets among youths (competence, confidence, connection, contribution, empowerment). The presence of these developmental assets is theorized to correspond with a reduction in delinquent behaviors.

There are key considerations in advancing this critical-PYD approach for intervening with disadvantaged youths. Specifically, Henggeler and Schoenwald (2011) note that effective interventions are clearly specified and support intervention fidelity. Thus, research is needed to further refine the current model. First, there is a need to clearly identify the mechanisms of change involved in this approach. While the ethnographic findings of this study were helpful in identifying potential intervention mechanisms and components, evaluations and effectiveness studies are needed to confirm or dispute these conclusions. Second, future research is needed to determine for whom and under what conditions an intervention guided by this model is most effective. Indeed, the implementation and outcomes of interventions can be undermined when a mismatch exists between the population that is being treated and the one for which evidence of treatment effectiveness exists (Henggeler & Schoenwald, 2011). Youths in PA were relatively high-functioning such that they did not exhibit complex or unmet mental health or substance abuse needs. Also, youths in PA were agreeable to participating in community engagement. For participants with mental health or substance abuse needs or who have no desire to be involved in community engagement efforts, this approach may have limited effectiveness. Similarly, this approach might not be appropriate for youths who have committed particularly serious person offenses (e.g., aggravated or sexual assault, homicide) and who may require a higher level of care (Mendel, 2011).

## Policy Implications

Fostering healthy youth development as a means of reducing juvenile delinquency has important policy implications. Specifically, the placing of youths in youth development programs may serve as an alternative to incarceration, especially for youth offenders who pose little risk of harm to others. Juvenile justice reform advocates have decried the nation's heavy reliance on incarceration in rehabilitating youths, citing evidence of the iatrogenic effects of incarceration (Fazal, 2014; Mendel, 2011). Yet, there is substantial readiness on the part of policymakers to reduce the rates at which youths—especially minority youths—are incarcerated (Mendel, 2011). The Annie E. Casey foundation (AECF), for example, has worked with juvenile justice systems across 200 counties in 39 states to increase community-based placements for youth offenders (AECF, 2013). Reform advocates maintain that the primary challenge now facing reform is the availability of effective and safe alternatives to incarceration (Fazal, 2014; Mendel, 2011). Thus, the time is ripe for community interventions informed by models such as the one proposed.

## Limitations

The study that informed the development of this model must be evaluated in light of some limitations. First, because of the study's ethnographic design, it cannot be determined whether participant outcomes were due solely to the intervention. These outcomes may reflect unusually high motivation or capabilities specific to youths who participated in the program, the program's activities, or a combination of both factors. For instance, because the youths in the program were not mandated to treatment but volunteered, they may exhibit greater motivation and readiness for behavioral change (Snyder & Anderson, 2009). The second limitation of this study is the sample, which was small and unique in some respects (e.g., high functioning). Thus, care must be taken when considering the suitability of the model for intervening with other populations. In particular, youths with severe trauma or substance use problems may require a more explicit psychotherapeutic approach.

## Conclusion

The goal of this article was to articulate a theoretically- and empirically based model of intervening with minority youths from LUC that was developmentally oriented and sensitive to unique social-structural challenges faced by this population. The proposed model emphasizes intervention features that help develop key youth assets, which in turn lead to favorable outcomes. The primary mechanism by which behavioral change is theorized to occur among youths is through their engagement with the community. From a public policy standpoint, interventions informed by this model are positioned to offer community-based alternatives to the developmentally inappropriate and iatrogenic practice of incarceration. Future research is needed to refine this model, including identifying possible additional mechanisms of change, documenting outcomes associated with this approach, and identifying youths for whom this type of approach is most effective.

**Keywords:** juvenile delinquency; positive youth development; critical theory; counterspaces; empowerment

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