

Reclaiming an African American Narrative:
Exploring Agency Among Young Adult Change-Agents

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Beth Margaret Dierker

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Co-Advisers: Joan DeJaeghere and David Chapman

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¹ Many of these names are pseudonyms.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my children. Your presence in this world makes me feel profoundly vulnerable yet fiercely hopeful and emboldened to make a difference.

Abstract

Young people play a significant role in shaping and changing societies, and their development into active, informed citizens determines the health of democratic societies. The present study explores the influences (ideas, experiences, and relationships) that shape six African American young adults' beliefs that they should and can effect change in their neighborhood. Many of these young people—all former participants in a youth-development program—exhibited the capacity to critically examine their worlds and develop plans to effect change, deep commitments to be change-agents in their community, and strong leadership skills. Framed by the concepts of transformative agency, coalitional agency, and critical consciousness, the study aimed to explore the roots of their beliefs about, commitments toward, and experiences of effecting change. The scope of this study appreciates the long-term and multifaceted nature of becoming an agent of social change in which identity and influence are rooted in a layered sense of belonging.

Scholars have paid relatively little attention to how social contexts and processes influence youths' long-term beliefs and commitments about contributing to and shaping society (Bajaj, 2009; Hart & Fegley, 1995; Watts & Guessous, 2006), and this study's findings surface the complex meaning making and social processes that fed into the young adults' beliefs that they should and could effect change. The young men and women highlighted the importance of exploring and claiming a rich cultural identity rooted in an African American counternarrative of courage and struggle. They also referenced two broad commitments—to honor others' humanity and to serve others and

struggle for justice—that guided their actions and decisions. When describing the experiences through which they came to learn and embrace these commitments, the young adults pointed to relationships, group expectations, and concrete experiences of effecting change that took place within the youth-development program. While much of the findings involved the young adults reflecting back on their experiences as youth, they also described the way they draw on those experiences and commitments as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of young adulthood.

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Chapter One: Introduction

What made the difference? What was it?

The conversation circled, quickly spiraling up to that big-picture question. Then, in a cascade of stories and laughter, the group of young adults and their elders shared what they thought “it” entailed. “We had opportunities to go further with everything . . . to brainstorm and take a leap of faith,” Julie recalled. “It’s also about ownership of the program and freedom,” Adam asserted. Michelle pointed to the importance of relationships, saying, “You can build a program around a relationship.” The elders posed questions to the young adults. Amy wondered why the youth stayed when there was no money left to pay stipends and no basketball court or other fancy facilities. “You made us think and open our eyes!” Adam began to explain. Julie volleyed back with a deeply personal question for her elders at the table, “how did you know what we needed when we needed it?” (field notes, February 12, 2012)

A few minutes earlier, feigning a casual tone to cover my excitement about this momentous step, I had introduced the idea of doing a research study focused on these young adults and the influences that fostered their agency for social change. I had met several of them years earlier in a youth-violence prevention initiative, and we had since crossed paths in the youth-development network that spanned the metropolitan area. Over that time, I observed what I thought was a unique capacity to reflect on their actions and circumstances and to envision and enact strategies for effecting change in their neighborhood. Inspired and curious, I began shaping research questions around what I thought I saw. Now, at the recommendation of their elder and former youth worker, Ed,

the group had gathered to meet with me. They were the most recent cohort of participants in a church-based youth-development program. I met one of the young women for the first time but knew the others. I had just explained that I sought to understand “what made a difference to make you become active, well-connected young community leaders” so that youth workers and agencies that fund and evaluate youth organizations could learn from their experiences. Shortly after I finished talking, the table erupted into conversation, questions, and ideas of what “it” was that made a difference. The meeting felt like a reunion with jokes and laughter as people revisited powerful, shared experiences.

Each person in the group was clearly excited to better understand and tell his or her own and one another’s stories. With each subsequent interview and meeting, the young adults posed more questions. Adrian wondered why Ed left a good paying job working at a camp with “regular, white high-class kids” to get paid less and “work with inner-city kids that’s ungrateful. Like, why? . . . What was the turning point in his life?” (Adrian, personal communication, May 19, 2013). Michelle wondered, “Why me? Why did you say I should do this or ‘I think you would be great at this’? Or why did you give me the opportunity? And not someone else?” (Michelle, personal communication, May 19, 2013). These questions were rooted in deep appreciation for their elders, and throughout the study, the young adults reflected on their past experiences and what “made a difference” for them, discussed how their past learning informed their ongoing journeys, and expressed a desire to continue to learn from their elders. This study addresses some of the questions the group posed, offers a nuanced picture of what the

young adults said fostered their agency for social change, serves as a springboard for the group to examine questions of personal and professional significance, and lends rich insights for youth workers, educators, and others who seek to foster the civic engagement and build the character of today's youth.

Research Problem

This research study explores the journeys of six young African American adults, who are former participants in a church-based youth program and recognized leaders and change-makers in their community. While much research focuses on marginalized students' strategies for academic attainment (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and, to a lesser extent, on the experiences of urban youth in community-based programs (McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 2001; O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003), few studies examine the way youth connect the knowledge and experiences acquired within youth programs to their neighborhood, schools, local government, and other organizational contexts. As a result, these areas of research offer only partial understanding of the dynamics at play in these youths' lives.

Psychological research delves deeply into how youth develop and explore agency through the lens of resiliency and the development of initiative, but the scope of the research is much too narrow to speak to the complex social interactions and contexts that contribute to youths' inclinations and actions toward social change (Larson, 2000; Smokowski, Reynolds & Bezruczko, 1999). Hart and Fegley's research on youth who are exceptionally involved in helping others in their community ("care exemplars") draws a wealth of important conclusions about these youth but calls for studies focusing on the

community context—the “[community] groups, each constituting a unique social institution with ties to the community, provide contexts within which strong moral commitments can develop and flourish” (1995, p. 1357). Watts and Guessous suggest the need for youth-related research on the “social processes that lead to a collective striving for social liberation” (2006, p. 72). The lack of attention to how social contexts and processes impact youth points to the need for researchers to follow youth within and beyond the boundaries of a particular organization or program. Exploring their agency in this way requires examining the ideas, experiences, and relationships that build agency for social change. The scope of this study appreciates the long-term and multifaceted nature of becoming an agent of social change in which identity and influence are rooted in a multifaceted sense of belonging.

Furthermore, by analyzing these youths’ experiences and stories about their influences, this research highlights the community-based and informal learning contexts for rich, relevant learning and skill development. Hervé Varenne urges researchers to “focus on what people do to educate themselves outside the constraints constituting the problematics of schooling” (2008, p. 356). In order to do so, he says that we must escape the power of institutions and norms that equate education with schooling; we must move “away, [meaning] NOT here *where I stand*” (2008, p. 359, emphasis in original). This study takes this recommendation seriously by shifting the focus to community sites and relational networks that youth identify as impactful. The decentering of this approach is essential to cast light on the “arbitrary constraints” that shape culture, society, institutional practices, and group and individual behavior (Varenne, 2008, p. 357). In

stripping away the privilege and protection that formal education enjoys as the dominant space for learning, this research illuminates the diverse ways that young people learn and teach themselves and one another across a variety of contexts, based on an understanding of education as “the total effects of all people to confront their conditions” (Varenne, 2008, p. 365).

Pollock encourages researchers to look more deeply and “examine everyday life in various places as containing countless moments of teaching and learning that are worth understanding” (2008, p. 396). In the context of youth engagement, researchers who attend to the “real-life experiences of specific parents and children in specific opportunity contexts” are able to articulate the unique cultural meanings youth and adults have about themselves, their roles, and their expectations, as well as what they bring to interactions with each other within and across the family, school, social, and other networks (Pollock, 2008, p. 369). What is it about this program, this context, these activities, or these people that draws a young person in and provides opportunities for enacting social change? How do various daily experiences reinforce or contradict their experience as members of multiple groups? How do young people integrate their diverse daily experiences with their evolving self? Deep cultural analysis begins to explain young people’s motivations, the complex barriers they face, and the interactive struggle between the two.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

This research study endeavors to understand the influences these young adults articulate as contributing to their sense of agency for social change. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What influences (ideas, experiences, and relationships) made these young adults believe they should and could effect change in their communities?
2. How do they draw on these influences (ideas, experiences, and relationships) as they navigate young adulthood?

Guiding Concepts

This study endeavors to draw connections across the young adults' reflections on what influenced their beliefs that they should and could effect change in their neighborhood and beyond. The following guiding concepts provide theoretical and empirical grounding for several of the young adults' attributes that I observed over time and that inspired the research questions.

- **Critical consciousness** is the capacity to recognize and understand one's circumstances in light of the power and social structures that constrain them (Freire, 1970).
- **Transformative agency**, the "belief in one's present or future ability to improve individual social mobility and transform elements of one's society," provides the frame for the research questions (Bajaj, 2009, p. 550).
- **Coalitional agency** "implies that our ability to affect social change, to empower others and ourselves necessitates seeing people, history and culture as inextricably bound to one another" (Chávez & Griffin, 2009, p. 8).

This conceptual model is based on my observations over time and serves as a starting point for organizing and framing my approach to understanding how these young adults may have become social-change agents. Critical consciousness and corresponding

action weave together in an iterative process of praxis. Varied and repeated experiences of taking action foster a sense of agency for social change that connect historical and cultural narratives with lived experiences. All of these components combine in a productive context of trusting relationships; community knowledge, resources, and affiliations; challenging conversations; and frustrating realities. As these youth critically considered the world around them, developed personal passions for addressing the issues they saw. In taking action, they built a sense of agency, earning a wealth of experience that inspires confidence about taking on new and challenging endeavors.

Paradigmatic Approach

The paradigmatic approach of critical constructivism combined with practice theory guides this study and takes the dynamic, contextually situated, and social change-oriented approach to human agency into account (Hatch, 2002; Kincheloe, 2008a; Maxwell, 2005; Anyon, 2009; Ortner, 1982). Constructivism asserts that individuals make meaning from their daily experiences to create knowledge and construct their realities (Hatch, 2002; Maxwell, 2005; Kincheloe, 2008a). Critical approaches highlight the importance of linking lived experience to social forces in order to develop of critical consciousness—a precursor to taking meaningful social action and a key guiding concept in this study (Kincheloe, 2008a).

The study embraces the notion that “youth grow up in communities, not programs” by rooting it in the context of ideas, experiences, and relationships that emerged over time and in a variety of neighborhood contexts (Pittman, 2000, p. 20). Given the collaborative nature of community organizing and activism that the

participants are engaged in and that such work addresses collectively identified issues, this framing seems appropriate. The study attempts to provide a fuller understanding of their critical consciousness and the reflection and action cycles that inform it. It traces the meaning youth make out of their journeys: What informs their motivation and sense of agency for social change? What moments of passion, anger, or inspiration do they specifically remember? What narratives, ideas, or experiences were a part of these incidents? How did youth interpret them and respond? Why did they respond this way? My study explores the meaning-making process and the knowledge, as informed by critical consciousness, which these young adults have constructed. How, if at all, does this broader consciousness promote, inform, or influence their actions toward social change?

Significance

This research study aims to contribute a nuanced understanding of the connections among the experiences of young, urban, social-change agents; the social structures that facilitate and constrain them; and how they come to effect change in these settings. Much research points to the constraints on youth civic engagement in poor, urban communities (Atkins & Hart, 2003). This study, however, explores how exceptionally involved youth have navigated these barriers and accessed resource- and opportunity-rich networks to act against oppressive social structures. Recognizing the opportunities embedded in neighborhoods traditionally viewed as resource-deprived offers a critical, yet empowering view of urban communities and can offer a starting

point for researchers, youth workers, and educators taking an assets-based approach to community-development initiatives.

Furthermore, research and past experiences point to the important role that youth play in shaping societies, but little is known about these change-makers themselves and the social processes they engage in to effect change. Hart, Atkins, Markey, and Youniss's review of research on "youth bulges" (disproportionately large groups of individuals ages 16–25, in comparison to adults in a society) indicates that youth in disproportionately young and poor communities had less civic knowledge but were more civically involved than their peers in other communities, making these communities an important context for social activism (2004). Knowing more about the complex and multidimensional relations, processes, tools, and strategies that facilitate sharing ideas and building cohesive groupings of change-minded individuals can help researchers, educators, youth development professionals, and community members understand and foster social change.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized in the following chapters. The Literature Review chapter further describes the way the paradigmatic approach and theoretical framework combine to offer a robust lens for understanding transformative and coalitional agency. The chapter then elaborates on the study's guiding concepts and reviews relevant empirical research. The third chapter discusses the epistemological framework for the study and explains the methodological decisions about its design and execution. Next, the Context chapter depicts the city and neighborhood where the young adults grew up,

introduces the youth organization (Youth Space) and the director's (Ed) approach to working with youth, and, finally, includes brief narratives about each of the young adults. Chapters 5–8 feature the study findings, which illuminate the roots that nurtured the young men and women's identities as change agents and fed their beliefs that they should and could effect change in their community. The first Findings chapter, “‘It Doesn't Have to Be the End of This Story’: Learning a Counternarrative of African American History,” discusses how the young men and women feel they should effect change and struggle toward the common good in part because they see themselves as co-authors of a counternarrative of African American history rooted in struggle and courage. The second Findings chapter, “Commitments in Action,” articulates two broad moral commitments that young adults pointed to as informing how they contribute to the counternarrative and enact their sense of agency in their lives. The third Findings chapter, “Relationships and Experiences that Fostered Agency for Change,” demonstrates the relationships and experiences that fostered the young adults' sense of individual and coalitional agency. In this section, they explain how the Youth Space became a safe space that offered opportunities to experience and practice the commitments in action. The fourth Findings chapter, “Navigating Now: Enacting Agency for Change in Young Adulthood,” explores the way the young adults are navigating their professional and personal lives in light of their past experiences of community involvement and their commitments in action. As they seek to balance their ideals and hopes with ever-increasing obligations, such as the realities of incurring bills and searching for a consistent paycheck as well as the needs of children and other family members, these young adults encounter avenues and roadblocks

to living out their agency for change. Finally, the ninth and final chapter highlights key points from the study findings and discusses implications for policy and practice related to youth development, community development, and education.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

This chapter begins by orienting the study within the critical constructivist paradigm and explaining how the theoretical framework of practice theory frames the study questions. Next, insights from the youth-development field provide a broad overview of youths' developmental needs and assets. Although the study participants are now young adults, they pointed to ideas, relationships, and experiences that were part of their high school years as shaping their sense of agency for social change. Next, the concepts that ground the inquiry—critical consciousness, transformative agency, and coalitional agency—are introduced. These ideas anchor the characteristics I observed in the young men and women as I began shaping my research topic and questions (a process discussed in the Methodology chapter), yet flexible and broad, they leave ample room for the data to surface additional ideas central to the young peoples' experiences. After briefly introducing the key concepts, this chapter reviews literature that a) establishes the importance of relationships and social supports, among other factors in the process of youth development, and b) empirically explores the significance of experiences in these settings for developing a sense of agency for social change. The empirical studies discussed are those that most closely align with the participants and context of this study—African American youth in community programs that focus on critical understanding of one's world and/or addressing community issues.

Paradigm: Critical Constructivism

This research study merges elements of the interpretive paradigm, specifically, constructivism, with the critical paradigm. The interpretive paradigm maintains that

language and categories of the human sciences offer only partial explanations of reality, that there are multiple perspectives to comprehending human actions (Kincheloe, 2008a). Constructivism understands humans not only as historically and socially constructed but also as creators of meaning and reality, who build from the material of prior experiences, interactions, and knowledge (Kincheloe, 2008a). This approach acknowledges the larger social processes that inform knowledge creation and make up social structures. It also recognizes human agency and the capacity to reflect on, question, and reshape social processes and structures. The constructivist approach, then, opens up possibilities for researching the dynamics of agency and structure. The social-change-agent concept used in this study focuses attention on young adults whose knowledge creation and constructions of reality run counter to prevailing societal norms. For example, these youth assert and act on the idea that young people, well before the age of 18, can and should actively contribute to society within and beyond the school, whereas the normative view treats youth as future citizens gaining knowledge and skills mainly in the classroom.

The “critical” in critical constructivism draws from critical theory, adding an emphasis on analyses of power, prior experiences and knowledge, and the importance of reflection to understand how that power influences reality (Kincheloe, 2008a). In this study and in Kincheloe’s framing, this lens is aligned with Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy (2008a). In his literacy work with marginalized groups in Brazil, Freire asserted that an individual must understand how structures, institutions, and social norms oppress him or her in order to take meaningful action toward liberation and through

multiple action-reflection cycles, to develop critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). While Freire viewed power mainly as an oppressive force over people, this study adopts Bartlett's reconceptualization of power as "circulating, or rather, simultaneously exercised and experienced by all" (2010, p. 170). This revised thinking about power better aligns with the perspectives of the youth in this study, who recognize oppressive systems and structures but experience and foster power in a collaborative, more horizontal way through collective action.

This study is also informed by Jean Anyon's call for critical social theory. It engages in what she called "an analytics of exogeny" (referencing the work of Saskia Sassen) (2009, p. 2), a method that assumes "one cannot understand or explain x by merely describing x . One must look exogenously at *non-x*—particularly the context and social forces in which the object of study is embedded" (p. 2). In this vein, she emphasizes the need for educational research that explores "opportunity structures and policies existing outside of schools and educational arenas that severely circumscribe the potential in urban districts (2009, p. 21). This study's focus on young adults who have managed to draw on and contribute to numerous community opportunity structures responds to some of Anyon's questions, such as "What, if anything, distinguishes these activist youth from those who, say, are incarcerated or otherwise caught up in the juvenile justice system? What can we learn from any differences in background, experience, education, and support that might exist?" (2006, p. 23). Her structuralist precepts form a backdrop for this study's exploration of the influences and social processes by which individuals interact to create meaning, leverage power, and respond to social forces. In

this study, opportunity structures are formal and informal “pathways to participation” in the community, such as participating in a school environmental program or organizing neighbors to address a safety issue (Keeter, 2002, p. 30; Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

It is also important to acknowledge that the young adults in this study were engaging in political and moral acts prior to the start of the research. In seeking to effect change in their communities, schools, and local government, they were questioning, resisting, and challenging social, economic, and political forces that made their lives difficult and their neighborhood a place of despair, hope, and struggle. The notion of struggle surfaces in much of the literature reviewed in this chapter, studies that, for the most part, involve African American youth in urban settings who engage in community-based and social-change efforts.

Theoretical Framework: Practice Theory

Practice theory helps articulate how repeated practices and experiences can contribute to a relatively stable set of values or commitments that guide these young change-agents’ behaviors. Sherry Ortner’s (1982) reflection on recent changes in anthropology provides grounding for the form of practice framing this study. Ortner observed a trend away from the Marxist-oriented focus on structure and culture as having determining power over actors toward a more practice-oriented approach that broadens concepts of actors’ agency by considering the ways structure constrains action but also how the system itself is created through actions. Ortner asserts that this approach to practice “tends to highlight social asymmetry as the most important dimension of both action and structure” (p. 147). Ortner outlines some of its core characteristics of a new

understanding of practice. First, this view of practice sees actions as “not just random response to stimuli, but governed by organizational and evaluative schemes” (p. 148) and tries to view the system as “an integral whole rather than trying to separate it out into levels” (p. 148). The approach sees practice itself as any action that has political implications. It emphasizes the way actions are often part of broader human “projects,” instead of simply individual, disconnected “moves,” and that “action itself *has* (developmental) structure, as well as operating *in*, and in relation *to*, structure” (p. 150, emphasis in original). Of most significance for this study is Ortner’s suggestion that rather than viewing rational individual interest as motivating actions (aligned with the short-term “moves” approach), a new approach to practice theory attempts to understand

“where actors . . . are coming from. . . . A system is analyzed with the aim of revealing the sorts of binds it creates for actors, the sorts of burdens it places upon them. . . . This analysis, in turn, provides much of the context for understanding actors’ motives, and the kinds of [long-term] projects they construct for dealing with their situations. (Ortner, 1982, p. 152)

The present study adopts this approach to practice as it seeks to understand how youth navigate their lives, drawing on relationships, ideas, and experiences that help them adjust to constraints and “binds” they encounter. This study uses Ortner’s (1982) contributions to practice theory by seeking a holistic and developmental understanding of these young men’s and women’s sense of agency for effecting change.

Foundations of Youth Development

This study is also informed by the youth-development literature, particularly the extensive theory and research related to developmental assets that youth need to be successful, the settings that support their development, and the important acknowledgement of the numerous arenas that youth navigate in their daily lives (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). In their 2002 report, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman reviewed a variety of youth-development and resilience studies and provided useful summaries of a breadth of foundational research. This study gleans from the report a concise list of assets that are grounded in developmental theory and thought to promote youths' transition into adulthood (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). While the report is broadly useful for understanding the needs of all youth, it does not specify the unique needs of youth who grow up in under-resourced communities and who are impacted by systemic violence. The five domains of developmental assets are as follows:

1. Physical development
2. Intellectual development—including academic success, decision-making skills, and knowledge of life skills and of those for navigating in various cultural contexts
- 3.–4. Psychological and emotional development—including coping skills, motivation and skills to accomplish and master things, confidence, and a “sense of a ‘larger’ purpose in life”

5. Social development—including connectedness with others, that is, a “sense of social place/integration—being connected and valued by larger social network, ability to navigate in multiple cultural contexts, and commitment to civic engagement”

(Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 75)

While not all of these assets are essential for successful development, the more assets one has across the various domains, the better (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The assets framework clarifies the simultaneous processes of personal and social development and the mutual benefits that acquiring assets in one domain can yield in others. Given the focus in this study on how young adults traverse their surroundings and networks, Eccles and Gootman’s synopsis of the “features of positive developmental settings” is also relevant. Most importantly, the detailed list extends beyond the scope of community programs for youth and relates to numerous foundational institutions and settings that should ideally include the following: physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; integration of family, school, and community efforts (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, pp. 90–91). The youth in this study have been exposed to some positive developmental arenas amid the numerous settings in their lives. The list of settings captures the affiliations, relationships, opportunities, and experiences to learn by doing as well as the norms among a group of people that provide continuity and support for the development of a sense of agency. The researchers emphasize the features of positive developmental settings “are features of a youth’s

interaction with the setting; they do not exist independently of the individual” (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 113, emphasis in original).

Guiding Concepts

Critical constructivism and practice theory highlight the capacity of youth to assess, examine, and make meaning from lived experiences, particularly in contexts where asymmetrical power structures present challenges and constraints in their lives. The constructed knowledge influences subsequent action. The conceptual ideas introduced in this section narrow the focus of the study, honing in on the meaning-making process behind the young adults’ beliefs that they should and could effect change. As is discussed in the Methodology chapter, part of identifying the research topic involved recognizing the young men’s and women’s critical consciousness—their keen understanding of the systems and structures that constrain their lives and damage their communities—and their strong conviction that they should and could change these systems and structures. The following concepts offer a theoretical and empirical grounding for the research questions. While they are briefly introduced in the subsections below, critical consciousness, agency, and coalitional agency are tightly interwoven. As it is not the purpose of this research to tease them apart, each concept is explained as it relates to this study’s approach and illuminates its findings.

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness is part of Friere’s (1970) notion of praxis, which entails cycles of action and reflection. It is the capacity to understand one’s circumstances in light of the power and social structures that constrain them (Freire, 1970). Ginwright and

Cammarota recast praxis by describing social action and critical consciousness as an interdependent “couplet,” arguing, “people can only truly ‘know’ that they can exercise control over their existence by directly engaging the conditions that shape their lives” (2002, p. 87). The importance of taking direct action is clear and helps bridge the divide between belief and behavior. As will be discussed in the Methodology chapter, one of the interview strategies entailed asking the participants about stories of taking action in their neighborhood, “making a difference,” or “having an impact.” Understanding the goals and intentions that led up to, inspired, and guided this action illuminates critical consciousness. Soliciting what they drew from those experiences, how (or whether) it shaped them and the way they viewed themselves in the world, and how it informed more stable, lasting beliefs about whether they should or could effect change touches on critical consciousness and sense of agency. This research embraces the notion of critical consciousness as building over time and becoming a stable lens for viewing the world. Throughout this study, the term critical consciousness is used to describe the awareness that power and social structures constrain one’s life (Freire, 1970).

In explaining what they call social-justice youth development—an approach that focuses on the connection between critical consciousness and social action—Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) articulated intersecting levels of awareness that youth need in order to develop critical consciousness. Their detailed understanding of critical consciousness offers a structure for viewing the study participants’ experiences and the scope of their critical consciousness. “Self-awareness” relates to various dimensions of identity, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, and how they are influenced by power

relationships (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). The second level is “social awareness,” which focuses on social issues and one’s ability to analyze them in terms of power and think about possibilities for addressing them (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). At the level of “global awareness,” one can reflect and develop empathy for other oppressed people, analyze historical and current forms of oppression, and in response change one’s behaviors (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). These three levels are interconnected, and the analysis of power is central to each part (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). This framework provides a sense of critical consciousness’ connections to social actions and structures and serves as a foundation for reviewing empirical studies related to its development among youth.

Also central to this study, critical race consciousness is the understanding that “race has a deep social significance that continues to disadvantage blacks and other Americans of color” (Aleinikoff, 1991, p. 1062). Part of the “self-awareness” that contributes to critical consciousness (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002), critical race consciousness surfaces throughout this study’s findings, especially related to their racial identity development and sense of agency for social change. Like critical consciousness, critical race consciousness involves analyses of power, but focuses on the role of race in the social and political structures that constrain peoples’ lives. Critical race consciousness is at the core of the assertion by critical race scholars that “racism is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in [American] culture [and must be] “unmask[ed] and expos[ed]...in its various permutations” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11).

Agency

“Agency” in this research study refers to the type that is driven toward transformation or social change (Bajaj, 2009; Giroux, 1996). The study applies Monisha Bajaj’s working definition of “transformative agency” or “transformative resistance,” which are defined as “belief in one’s present or future ability to improve individual social mobility and transform elements of one’s society” (Bajaj, 2009, p. 550). Bajaj pointed out that critical consciousness and taking action “toward positive social change” (2009, p. 548) both individually and collectively are central to transformative agency. Although she noted the importance of actions, much of her discussion is based on beliefs (2009). Her research comparing sibling pairs’ sense of agency with one sibling attending a public school and one a private school in Zambia that infused agency-building messages throughout its culture and curriculum revealed that although the private school students had higher senses of agency overall, their levels dropped drastically when they encountered a sparse job market and corrupt higher-education entrance processes. Bajaj concluded that transformative agency is situational (2009), and in extending that observation, I would argue that taking action within the boundaries of a safe, comfortable context and extending oneself to act beyond those boundaries requires a much more developed sense of agency.

A form of transformative agency that is helpful for the present study is critical resistance or strategic agency (Giroux, 1996; Noguera & Canella, 2006). Henry Giroux differentiated critical resistance from other forms of resistance, pointing out that such acts are inspired by critical consciousness and deliberately strive toward the common good

(1996). Drawing on Giroux's work, Pedro Noguera and Julio Cannella explained that knowing the difference between an "act of defiance . . . [and an] act of resistance [requires understanding] the subjective motivation of the actors involved" (2006, p. 335). This understanding would also illuminate the conditions (i.e., their perceived options among the opportunities and constraints in the social structure) under which youth make decisions and choices (Noguera & Cannella, 2006).

Both transformative agency and critical resistance build on the foundation of critical consciousness and action. Transformative agency focuses on the individual's sense of agency in relation to broader social structures and processes. Along with critical resistance, it highlights one's capacity to recognize and counteract (through beliefs and/or actions) the structures and processes that circumscribe one's life. Bajaj's focus on agency relates to beliefs that are situational (2009). Noguera and Cannella (2006) shifted the focus to the action itself and delved into the meaning and purpose the actor brings into the act. These nuances to the idea of transformative agency guide this research as it explores the ideas, experiences, relationships, and contexts that fostered and, at other times, hindered, these young adults' sense of agency for social change. Throughout this study, the terms transformative agency or agency for social change are used interchangeably.

Each of the above approaches to transformative agency highlights the importance of action. It is helpful to differentiate agency from the broader concept of "empowerment," which is also a rich area of youth development research. Empowerment is a "*process of change*" in the extent to which one exercises power (Kabeer, 1999, p.

437, emphasis in original). Kabeer defines agency as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them” and views agency as one dimension of power as one moves from being “denied choice,” or disempowered, to having “*the ability to make choices*,” or being empowered (1999, p. 436-7, emphasis in original). This study’s use of agency reflects the importance of having the capacity or exercising the power to take action.

Coalitional Agency

Another important kind of agency highlights the influence of one’s relationships, culture, and “belongings with others” (Chávez & Griffin, 2009, p 8; Carillo Rowe, 2008). Drawing on the work of Aimee Carillo Rowe (2008) on “coalitional subjectivity,” which asserts that we come to understand ourselves through our relationships with others, Chávez and Griffin (2009) proffered the term “coalitional agency.” They explained, “A coalitional agency implies that our ability to affect social change, to empower others and ourselves necessitates seeing people, history and culture as inextricably bound to one another” (Chávez & Griffin, 2009). The authors called for recognition of the way agency resides in connectedness. They went on to say that the “power we enact is one grounded in a profound cognizance of the interconnections and interdependences of people, privilege, and social/political/economic opportunities” (pp. 7–8). This emphasis on connectedness relates to the idea of struggle, which surfaces later in this literature review and is also evident in the study findings. The studies reviewed below describe individuals who shared their own struggles with others and collectively began to recognize the broader political systems that impact their lives (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). One study’s findings suggest that what made the difference between high academic

achievements of some youth versus their highly aspirational but not lower achieving peers was the way their mentors and family members frame their experiences and efforts in terms of a broader struggle of African Americans (O'Connor, 1997). Coalitional agency is a particularly relevant concept for this study, and the term will be used in subsequent chapters to highlight the influence history, culture, relationships, affiliations, and “belongings with others” on one’s sense of agency (Chávez & Griffin, 2009, p 8; Carillo Rowe, 2008).

Weaving the Guiding Concepts Together

The remainder of the chapter explores empirical studies that illuminate critical consciousness, critical race consciousness, transformative agency, and coalitional agency. It draws primarily on studies involving African American youth in nonformal learning contexts to illustrate this body of research’s contributions to this study and the existing gaps that this study addresses. While each project uses unique terms, they all strive toward understanding the processes involved in fostering beliefs that then translate into actions for change.

Many concepts are similar to transformative agency in the youth-development and civic-engagement literature. One example is the idea of public efficacy, “the extent to which young people see themselves as capable of affecting or influencing both their CBYO [Community-based Youth Organization] and the broader community” (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 17). O’Donoghue and Kirshner took the idea of public efficacy from a qualitative research study with five social action-oriented youth organizations (2003). Spending between six months and two years (the length varied by

organization) observing daily activities and conducting interviews with youth participants (N=55), O'Donoghue and Kirshner hoped to better understand what youth gained from their participation in CBYOs and what those gains meant to the youth (2003).

Youth in the CBYOs had a strong sense of agency, which was “tightly linked to their experiences within the organizations and their public work, often tied to the development of skills and knowledge or to their connection to the organization itself” (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 16). Youth expressed a range of examples of when they felt they were “making an impact,” from actually making a change to building awareness of an issue to serving as a positive example (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). The researchers also pointed out, “These varied understandings [of public efficacy] grew from experiences across multiple levels—from interpersonal relationships, to organizational decision-making, to public action” (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 18). This key point reflects the embeddedness of agency within numerous contexts and relationships, illuminating both its contingent nature and its potential to grow into coalitional agency.

O'Donoghue and Kirshner's (2003) research teased out entwined experiences, skills, and affiliations that informed the youths' sense of agency for change. However, since transformative agency is situational, knowing how it transfers and builds both within and beyond the CBYO is an important contribution that the present study makes. It makes sense that a CBYO, which is often structured to support youths' voices, decision-making, and collective action, would build a sense of public efficacy or, in this study, transformative agency. A more in-depth understanding across contexts and

experiences is needed in order to comprehend how a relatively sustained and consistent sense of transformative agency develops.

Taking action provides youth the chance to learn “strategies for making their voices heard by a broader public” and promotes a more nuanced consideration of how local government and key civic leaders function—knowledge that facilitates taking action (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 16). For the youth in O’Donoghue and Kirshner’s study, strategies such as building coalitions, mobilizing press for events, and communicating with government officials were connected to and guided by specific campaign goals for addressing local issues (2003). Youth came to learn that, for their actions and strategies to have an impact, they must adapt to the perspectives of key leaders, such as school-board and city-council members (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). Developing the ability to shift perspectives and becoming familiar with the “personalities and political stances” of leaders comprised an important lesson in the navigating systems and structures where youth do not typically penetrate (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 16).

Contributing to decision-making also constitutes an action or experience that may promote a sense of agency. Assessing information and making informed decisions that impact others are important experiences for youth (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). O’Donoghue and Kirshner observed that the “opportunity to shape something meaningful increased motivation for young people to engage in [decision-making] processes that are sometimes lengthy and frustrating” (2003, p. 12). Through firsthand experience of making complex, real decisions in groups, youth gained a distinct view of the need for

consensus-building processes for decision-making, quicker “majority rules” methods, and a combination of these depending on the issue and timeframe for action (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). Youth said they learned the most, were more motivated, and felt they have more of a voice through consensus-building approaches, but they also felt frustrated with the slowness of the process (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). Without direct experience applying various approaches in different circumstances, these youth would not have such grounded insight into these subtleties or a sense of the full scope of alternatives for decision-making. As youth experiment with different modes of interaction, take up issues, and integrate new knowledge and ideas into their decisions, they are examining concerns that matter to them and organizing to address them. Through participating in decision-making processes, they recognize the contextual and contingent nature of their work and come to understand the reach of their decisions—experiences that can contribute to a broader sense of transformative agency.

In their study, working with and getting to know others—peers and adults alike—helped youth learn the value of others’ ideas and foster trust in the group (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). One young person’s statement about a group’s diversity illustrates the usefulness of listening to others:

When there’s not a big diversity within the group, it’s hard to see different perspectives; like for [a youth in our group], she’s a lesbian, and we had some groups [applying for grants] that were about being gay or lesbian or transsexual, and hearing what she had to say about those groups is something that I didn’t even think about because I don’t know that

perspective. (Youth interviewee, cited in O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 10)

In referring to the concrete experience of a conversation with her peer, this youth notes the meaning she drew and the decentering she experienced, insights that contribute to her own meaning-making and may change the way she interacts and collaborates with others in the future.

Youths' experiences with adults are another vital element of working with others. Negotiating these relationships is complex and sometimes challenging, especially in CBYOs where youth-adult partnerships (versus a more hierarchical structure) are the goal (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). Youth expressed that they valued learning to work with an adult—a skill that clearly extends beyond the CBYO. The researchers' observed that youth sometimes have to apply their communication skills to assert themselves and claim their roles and responsibilities when adults overstep boundaries (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). Going through the process of identifying these problems, deciding to confront them, and speaking up to adults in a relatively safe context allows youth to learn to navigate power relations and assert their voices, fostering both critical consciousness and agency.

O'Donoghue and Kirshner's research set out to articulate civic outcomes of involvement in CBYOs, but their examples also point to the processes and interactions that take place in spaces that build youths' capacity to navigate relations and gain concrete experiences and skills (2003). The various dimensions of these interactions, such as "the group decisions, the conflicts over fairness, the construction of ground

rules,” offer youth “personal knowledge of what democratic participation looks like” (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 8). I would add that youth not only get a sense of what democratic participation looks like, but they also gain concrete experiences in democratic participation, creating a reference point for subsequent involvement in such processes.

Unfortunately, O’Donoghue and Kirshner’s emphasis on learning gains or outcomes from CBYO participation comes at the expense of comprehending the connections between awareness of issues and experiences of taking action which could offer opportunities for praxis (2003). Their examples effectively illustrate critical consciousness but do not address how it is developed through iterative action-reflection cycles. One promising area for further analysis that may illuminate this important link between action and reflection is the multiple references within the youths’ quotations about their motivations for getting involved. While O’Donoghue and Kirshner (2003) dispersed these quotes across their article to attest to their outcome themes, a sense of productive (motivational) anger seems to emerge through reflections and discussions aimed at fostering critical consciousness. For example, one student, who often let problems “pass by,” expressed how thinking about the issue fostered anger and the desire to act: “I can’t just let it pass by anymore and so . . . after you think about it . . . you get kind of mad about it, so you kind of angry and then you want to do something about it” (youth, quoted in O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 15). For another study participant, getting angry and getting involved fueled one another: “we discussed about the situation between us [CBYO board] and the school board. And then I got more angry, so I got

more involved. . . . So, that's how, I guess it just built up during coming here, because I knew if I didn't come here, I know I wouldn't be interested at all or wouldn't know what was going on" (youth, quoted in O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 17). This second comment reveals the young person's awareness of an issue and how conversations about it caused her to feel more invested in the process and outcome as well as motivated her to deepen her involvement. This connection among awareness of deep injustices, a resulting anger, and action deserves further attention, specifically the translation of thoughts into actions along with the social processes within which these thoughts and actions take place.

Drawing connections between historical and cultural narratives and youths' lives can help elucidate structural and historical forces, an important step toward developing critical consciousness (Ginwright, 2007). Shawn Ginwright conducted an ethnographic study over a three-year period with fifteen African American youth in a program called Leadership Excellence (LE) (2007). Through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, Ginwright explored youth experiences during their involvement with community-based organizations in black communities in Oakland. These organizations aimed to "foster political consciousness and prepare Black youth to address issues in their communities" (Ginwright, 2007, p. 404). Ginwright called these connections and learning "critical social capital" (2007, p. 404). Through discussions and political-education activities that help youth discover shared personal struggles with their peers and then make connections to larger political issues, they learned to discuss the causes of community problems and started to find solutions. Ginwright pointed out that such

conversations also connect “historical racial oppression and present-day racial issues” (2007, p. 413). Several quotes from youth involved in the program illustrate how they saw structural and historical forces in relation to their own lives—a first step in developing critical consciousness. One person reconsidered his use of a common term after participating in an activity at LE that provided some historical background:

Before I came here [LE], I didn’t know what the term *nigga* meant, and I didn’t really care. . . . I didn’t know how our ancestors felt when the White man called us *nigger*. I thought about it differently after this activity—how it must have felt to be treated like we were dogs, like we were animals, to be tied up and pulled around in the dark. It hurts to know that our people have experienced this. But you don’t realize this until you experience something like this activity, even for just an hour. I learned that we call each other that word without knowing the price Black folks paid. (Youth interviewee, cited in Ginwright, 2007, p. 413)

The activity the youth mentions was a powerful two-hour blindfolded reenactment, starting with the transatlantic slave trade and moving through American life in the 1950s and 1960s (Ginwright, 2007). The young man’s words communicate how the painful experience and discussion affected him intellectually and emotionally and may also shape his actions, as his later reference to “that word” suggests. This example highlights the way ideas and narratives from the past can raise consciousness of a concept in its contemporary social use and inform critical consciousness, critical race consciousness, and actions in youth.

Ginwright also highlighted the importance of fostering a “sense of common struggle” by creating open, trusting spaces, where youth can talk about their problems (p. 412, 2007). Within these spaces, facilitators deliberately blur “the boundary between personal and political dimensions of daily life” to encourage youth to see the potential of taking action both to address a personal issue and reframe it in terms of a social-justice outcome that promotes the good of others as well (Ginwright, 2007, p. 414). Ginwright shares an example of a young mother, who viewed her school’s closing of its childcare center as a political issue, rather than a personal problem, and organized other young mothers to confront the school superintendent, which resulted in its reopening. Altogether, Ginwright’s approach of connecting the personal and the political and of fostering “a sense of common struggle” (2007, p. 412) leverages a developmental link between critical consciousness and coalitional agency.

Ginwright’s (2007) study is helpful in recognizing some strategies that LE used to situate youths’ struggles in broader historical and cultural frames of reference. It also illustrates some dimensions of critical consciousness. Fostering ties among youth to find common struggles and shared experiences offers a launching point for more challenging historical discussions and helps identify societal problems that require collective struggle to address. Ginwright noted various instances of how LE is a venue for sharing ideas and fostering the knowledge, skills, relationships, and experiences that form the foundation of critical consciousness. However, his article only briefly addresses examples of youth reflections and does not connect them to the actual program methods and strategies. As a result, the reader is left with only a general concept of the organizational culture and

norms and little concrete knowledge about the actions and specific narratives that evolved and connected over time to foster critical consciousness. A more thorough exploration of how connections between ideas and issues are made and how individual youth reflect on their learning and apply it to new issues and settings would be useful. As with many program-level studies in youth development, Ginwright's study positioned the organization as the intervention, a limited scope that situated key youth statements, observations, and actions mainly in relationship to the program (2007). This limited frame ignored a complex array of other factors that inform critical consciousness, and it sacrificed the in-depth understanding of how youth integrate and apply their learning across contexts, especially in school and on the streets where their critical consciousness may be less recognized, valued, or encouraged.

The process of sociopolitical development (SPD) incorporates several key concepts that are relevant to this research study. Watts and Guessous defined SPD as “the evolving, critical understanding of political, cultural, economic, and other systemic forces that shape society and one's status within it, and the associated process of growth in relevant knowledge, analytic skills, and emotional faculties” (2006, p. 60). Watts and Guessous used quantitative methods to study SPD, and their method for measuring critical consciousness is insightful for the present study.

Sociopolitical development is grounded in developmental psychology, but Watts and Guessous noted that it integrates social theory in its acknowledgement of “oppression and the influence of forces outside of the individual” (2006, p. 60). As illustrated in the model below, SPD maps out the relationship between critical consciousness, here labeled

“social analysis,” and societal involvement, taking into account the notion that one’s sense of agency and the presence of meaningful opportunities for involvement impact the relationship between one’s thoughts and behavior.

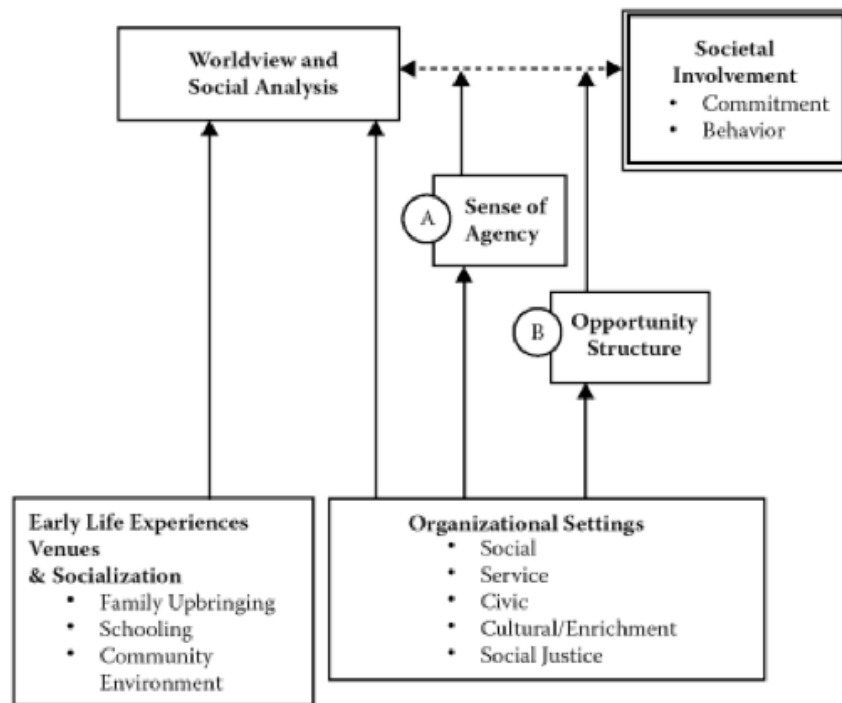


Figure 1 (Watts & Guessous, 2006, p. 62)

Watts and Guessous’s research study tested their theorized relationship between “worldview and social analysis” and “societal involvement,” while considering the interaction that a “sense of agency” has on this relationship (Watts & Guessous, 2006). They surveyed 131 youth, 79% of whom identified as African American, drawn from youth programs in Atlanta. Social analysis is understood as examinations of power and making “connections between life in their communities and larger social forces”—or what I refer to as “critical consciousness” (2006, p. 61). To measure social analysis, the researchers asked students about whether they believed individual circumstances were a

result of one's actions and choices or of larger forces out of one's control. They assessed involvement both in terms of intentions or commitments and actual activities. The researchers found evidence of a positive relationship between a belief that contextual factors were mainly at fault for individual misfortunes and a commitment to societal involvement. However, this belief does not have a positive relationship with actual behavior. This distinction between commitment and behavior is foundational in the research, and the findings match the researchers' expectation that the jump from commitment to action differentiated armchair activists from activists (Watts & Guessous, 2006).

These findings suggest that critical awareness of one's circumstances appears to be related to positive attitudes and ideas about societal involvement, but that relationship does not hold for actions of societal involvement. While the finding empirically highlights the gap between ideas and actions, a critical constructivist approach could tease out an understanding based in experiences of what facilitates and what impedes movement from commitment to action. Watts and Guessous's treatment of critical consciousness is also limited as it used a two-item psychological scale that did not begin to account for the complexities of critical consciousness and the lived experiences, shared knowledge, relationships, and context that inform it. Qualitative research from a constructivist approach is needed to flesh out the dimensions and scope of this consciousness. By understanding influential experiences and relationships of young social-change agents, the present study is intended to uncover the way personal, relational, and contextual factors inform, foster, or otherwise contribute to their exceptional social involvement and

how this activity weaves into and shapes their critical consciousness and subsequent actions.

Although Watts and Guessous had hoped to incorporate social processes and forces into their model, their study is not designed to do so. By relying on instruments, measures, and methods that have been validated and used in psychology, the researchers failed to capture the behaviors, actions, social processes, and contextual information that they argued is essential for understanding SPD. The methods and the statistical principles used to measure the SPD model were linear and could not account for the complexity of the process, which Watts and Guessous argued, is a long-term development with numerous “reciprocal effects” between various components in the model (2006, p. 62). The difficulty of accounting for social processes is reinforced by the fact that the researchers did not even include the “opportunity structures” component of SPD in the data collection and analysis. Without attending to how organizations, networks, and relationships affect youths’ critical consciousness, commitments, and actions, the study contributes very little insight into social processes. The constructivist approach in the present study allows the actors to point out the relevant connections in order to learn about where their sense of agency and passion is drawn from and how it is fostered. This rich, contextualized understanding may contribute explanatory power to the understudied SPD model.

Developing awareness of public problems is a fundamental component of critical consciousness. In the aforementioned study on youth learning in five social action-oriented youth organizations, O’Donoghue and Kirshner found that reflection on and

discussion of issues that encouraged analysis of “deeper systemic causes” help youth see their actions and roles in relation to the problems and consider the systems, structures, and sociopolitical dynamics at play (2003, p. 14). One youth shared how his raised awareness affected the way he viewed himself vis-à-vis the issues around him:

Say you let something just pass you by at first, right? And you just keep letting it pass by. You ain't trippin' off it. But then you learn something about it and then you be like, well, I can't just let it pass by anymore and so . . . after you think about it . . . you get kind of mad about it, so you kind of angry and then you want to do something about it. (Youth interviewee, cited in O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003, p. 15)

This quote illustrates the interconnections among awareness, personal reflection, and intentions toward action that are wrapped up in critical consciousness. O'Donoghue and Kirshner described this as “a form of critical awareness that comes with seeing things in a new way. It suggests a transition from accepting the way things are to recognizing that things do not have to be that way” (2003, p. 15). As youth developed the capacity to recognize the gaps between what is and what could be and make connections between personal and public issues, the possibility of taking action became more real. “[S]eeing things in a new way” can foster the desire to act. But, as Watts and Guessous indicated, there was a big difference between intention and action (2006).

The ability to use prior experiences of taking action regarding social issues may help translate intention into behavior (Watts & Guessous, 2006). In the aforementioned quantitative study on an SPD model, Watts and Guessous found that concrete

experiences, as measured by questions addressing actual behaviors and project roles, moderated the relationship between critical consciousness and real behaviors (2006). When the researchers accounted for the impact of concrete experiences on the relationship between critical consciousness and behaviors, they found that, at higher levels of concrete experiences, beliefs in larger forces as the primary contribution to an individual's circumstances are positively related to behavior (Watts & Guessous, 2006). At low levels of concrete experiences, beliefs in larger forces are negatively related to behavior (Watts & Guessous, 2006). In other words, without the experiences as evidence that one can resist powerful forces, understanding of these forces may make it less likely that one will act. This phenomenon could be due to feeling overwhelmed and insufficient in light of powerful systems and structures. However, concrete experiences of acting—even in small ways—on community or political issues seem to bridge the gap between personal beliefs and social action.

Although I critique Watts and Guessous's (2006) work in the section above, I would like to expand on my observation that their theoretical model of SPD oversimplifies a complex, contingent, and contextual process. They approached societal involvement as an outcome of the interplay between agency and critical consciousness, when, in fact, their findings suggested that experiences of actual involvement relates to societal involvement. Societal-involvement behaviors should not be viewed as outcomes or end points of a developmental trajectory, but rather as inputs in the circular, iterative process of praxis. The researchers created a false separation between actions by considering some as part of an agency-building process and others as outcomes of the

interplay between critical consciousness and sense of agency. This arbitrary separation disregards the complexity of human experience. The critical constructivist lens potentially opens up a much more robust notion of how actions and critical consciousness relate.

Role models and mentors are also powerful sources of knowledge that youth can employ to inform their beliefs and actions. Carla O'Connor's research with six African American youth in Chicago illustrated this power over youths' senses of agency (1997). O'Connor drew six exceptional youth from a group of twenty-six, who were being interviewed as part of a study on "their conceptions of opportunity structure" and their chances to succeed and improve their social mobility (1997, p. 604). The six were unique in that their optimism for the future was matched by high levels of academic achievement; yet, they had "a particularly acute recognition of how race and class (and, in two cases, gender) operated to constrain the life chances of people like themselves" (O'Connor, 1997, p. 605). Although O'Connor's study was interested in academic achievement, the underlying focus on social and relation factors and critical consciousness positioned role models as key inputs in transformative agency and highlighted the way agency was influenced by networks of relations and ideas.

O'Connor supposed that youth who have a clear understanding of the constraints that impinge on their lives were more likely to disengage from hopelessness and frustration, so she wondered how these "resilient six" combined high levels of critical consciousness with high aspirations and academic achievement (1997, p. 608). O'Connor found that their "familiarity with struggle" set them apart: these youth were "privy to

social behavior and discursive practices which not only expressed the need for struggle but also expressed its potential to produce desirable change” (p. 605). The social behavior and discursive practices were shared by black adults who framed and interpreted barriers and challenges in terms of collective racial and class-based injustices and their responses as ways of engaging in collective struggle (O’Connor, 1997). “Struggle” denotes the idea of individual and collective resistance to oppression. The youth in the study provided examples ranging from a black man, who refused to move his family out of a neighborhood that was growing increasingly hostile to its presence, to conversations with siblings and teachers about the need for African Americans to “come together” and “fight back” against racism and injustice (O’Connor, 1997).

O’Connor suggested that these youths’ familiarity with struggle could illustrate their “embeddedness in a cultural context which might more readily translate their penetrations into political strategies” (1997, p. 602). She stated:

I contend that these messages, especially those which emphasized the potential for collective action, conveyed the agency that resides (even when dormant) with marginalized communities. In short, resilient youths, unlike other optimistic respondents, appeared to have not only insight into human agency at the personal and individual level but also a basis for interpreting Black individuals and collectives as agents of change. (O’Connor, 1997, p. 621)

In other words, the models of agency in these youths’ lives framed their actions in political and collective terms and provided strong examples. This study speaks to the

power of role models or mentors in demonstrating and fostering critical consciousness and in revealing ways to consciously resist oppressive systems and structures (O'Connor, 1997). These role models, then, merge personal knowledge and experiences with historical narratives and notions of collective struggle to guide actions.

Since the present study draws on the narratives of struggle that the young adults were exposed to, it offers the opportunity to explore how youth construct meaning out of models of collective struggle and whether that builds a sense of agency and/or coalitional agency. Using an approach similar to O'Connor's, this study aims to highlight the experiences and relations that are most significant and effective for these youth in terms of their journeys of becoming social-change agents.

Through the course of the present study, the young adults expressed ways their moral commitments shaped their change-agent identities. Moral commitments are closely related to this study's guiding concepts of critical consciousness, transformative agency, and coalitional agency. In fact, upon reviewing 44 empirical studies on youth involved in community service, Youniss and Yates (1996) offered a framework that connected community service to identity development via the developmental concepts of agency, social relatedness, and moral-political awareness. Hart and Fegely's (1995) study on self-understanding and moral development among youth was among the studies that informed Youniss and Yates's (1996) framework and which also offers insights to the present study.

Hart and Fegely (1995) selected 95 "care exemplars" that had been nominated by church or youth group leaders. The researchers defined "care exemplars" as "adolescents

who had demonstrated remarkable prosocial behavior through their commitments to care for others” (Hart & Fegely, 1995, 1346). All of the participants were African-American and Latin-American from an economically distressed New Jersey neighborhood. Each care exemplar was matched with a comparison youth who had similar demographic characteristics. Data were collected through unstructured, semi-structured and structured interviews, with data from the structured interviews drawn into an “identity matrix” (Hart & Fegely, 1995, 1351). Hart and Fegely found that care exemplars were more likely to describe themselves by referring to “moral personality traits and to moral goals” (1995, 1356). The care exemplars’ identities were also more oriented toward their ideals and their parents’ values than they were to peer influences, whereas the comparison peers were more oriented toward their peers (Hart & Fegely, 1995). Finally, the care exemplars were more likely to “articulate theories of self in which personal beliefs and philosophies are important” (Hart & Fegely, 1995, 1356).

Altogether, the study findings illustrated the strong connections between identity and moral commitment for the care exemplars. Given the parallels between the “care exemplar” concept and this study’s identification of “change-agents” (a descriptor detailed in the Methodology chapter), Hart and Fegely’s (1995) findings highlight the potential importance of moral commitments as contributors to these young adults’ change-agent identities. Furthermore, moral commitments play a role in numerous levels of belonging discussed in the present study, particularly the young adults’ belonging in the church-based, social-justice-oriented Youth Space and in an African American historical and cultural tradition shaped by the social gospel.

Conclusion

Research on youth in community organizations points to opportunities for developing critical consciousness and for engaging in activities like taking concrete action, making decisions, and working with others (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003; Ginwright, 2007). Furthermore, adults who model discourses and actions rooted in critical consciousness and aimed at questioning or effecting change in society serve as powerful examples of attitudes and behaviors that youth integrate into their way of knowing and being in the world (O'Connor, 1997). The empirical research reviewed in this chapter illuminates the building blocks for transformative agency, illustrates the interconnectedness of critical consciousness and concrete experiences, and highlights the coalitional agency in one's belongings—in relationships with others, within historical narratives, and as part of a group learning and taking action together.

However, with the exception of O'Connor's (1997) and Hart and Fegely's (1995) studies—the former with resilient youth and the latter with “care exemplars”—all of the studies were framed in terms of a program or organization. This lens is helpful and informative if the goal is to make arguments for the importance of youth programs. But, in order to speak to the broader value of youth participation in society, researchers must trace connections across contexts and experiences. Is youths' meaningful and active involvement shaping social institutions and policy? To address this question, the scope of the research must go beyond the program and analyze the way youth carry new awareness, actions, and experiences across settings and over time, integrating them into their constructions of reality and shaping their actions. This study's second research

question regarding how young adults draw on their sense of agency as they navigate young adulthood traces knowledge construction and transformative agency across time and contexts.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter describes how the research, which addresses a gap in the literature by building a qualitative youth-centered, as opposed to program-centered, picture of the influences on agency for social change over time and across contexts, was designed in order to answer the research questions from a critical constructivist approach. After discussing the case-study methodology and the methods used to gather data, it explores the data-analysis strategies and the measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the process (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Each component in the design of this study aimed to address the following questions:

1. What influences (ideas, experiences, and relationships) made these young adults believe they should and could effect change in their communities?
2. How do they draw on these influences (ideas, experiences, and relationships) as they navigate young adulthood?

Paradigm

As previously discussed, this research study combines elements of the interpretive and the critical paradigms. Within the interpretive paradigm, constructivism contends that individuals construct knowledge about the world through their day-to-day experiences. Constructivism asserts that there are multiple realities and that knowledge is subjective (Hatch, 2002). As a researcher, I engaged with participants to understand the meaning they made from their experiences and to co-construct their realities (Hatch, 2002). Maxwell discusses the intellectual goals that qualitative research especially addresses (2005). His points about qualitative research help articulate this study's broader

interpretive approach because the two share an emphasis on understanding the meaning of experiences for the study participants. Maxwell explains, “By ‘meaning’ we are interested not in just documenting a perspective, but in understanding a reality as experienced by the participants” (2005, p. 22). This study aims to understand the ideas, relationships, and experiences that help interpret the reality of young social-change agents as they reflect on and navigate their worlds. Furthermore, qualitative research is well suited for understanding the “particular *context* within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22, emphasis in original). The youth in this study are situated within a larger social network and a local context. The setting creates a variety of opportunities and constraints that shape the youths’ experiences. Finally, this study endeavors to “understand the *process* by which events and actions take place,” a particular focus of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22, emphasis in original). In seeking to comprehend how some youth have become thriving community leaders and professionals as young adults, this research seeks to illuminate the processes through which they came to believe they should and could effect change. The study, then, uses two key features of a qualitative approach to answering the research questions: understanding meaning within contexts and illuminating the processes that lead to outcomes (Maxwell, 2005).

Consistent with collaborative approaches to conducting interpretive research, the study included ongoing conversations with participants about the process. In the initial stage, I met with the young adults and their elders to gauge their interest in the topic and invite their comments on and critiques of the study questions and design. As discussed

below, the scope of the research and the data-collection process shifted based on conversations with the young adults. Furthermore, the initial talk with Ed and the large group meeting that launched the study also generated discussion about the ways the potential findings could inform local youth-development practice and policies.

Throughout the analysis phase of the study, member check meetings on the preliminary findings were conducted and the young adults and Ed viewed excerpts of writing about their ideas to ensure the accuracy of details and fidelity of my interpretations. This reflexivity in the research method, which seeks to engage participants in a period of reflection on themselves and their circumstances, stems from the critical paradigm that views the research process as potentially fostering action to address concerns or issues that participants recognize and analyze through the research process (Hatch, 2002).

Furthermore, while the focus of this study is on opportunities that foster youths' sense of agency, it also accounts for the numerous struggles they have faced. In accordance with the critical paradigm, these barriers themselves are understood as constraints that limit human possibility and are examples of how the unequal distribution of resources and power in society has shaped these youths' lives (Anyon, 2009). This analysis of power in the form of systems and structures is typical of critical theory, yet this study also incorporates a reconceptualization of power as "circulating, or rather, simultaneously exercised and experienced by all," an approach better aligned with the way the participants in this study likely experience power (Kincheloe, 2008a; Bartlett, 2010, p. 170).

Methodology: Case Study

The study used a case-study methodology. The decision to use this design was shaped by careful consideration of the research questions and by my familiarity with the individuals, networks, and context involved in the research. This section outlines the rationale for choosing the methodology.

Merriam defines a case study as “an in-depth description of a bounded system” (2009, p. 40). Yin, in turn, describes it as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (2009, p. 18). Merriam points out that “the unit of analysis, *not* the topic of investigation, characterizes a case study,” that the case must be “intrinsically bounded,” and that there must be a finite number of observations or interviews that would allow the researcher to address the research questions (2009, p. 41, emphasis in original). Here, the case—that is, the “bounded system” or “phenomenon”—is the group of young adults within their community setting, and the study specifically explored the ideas, relationships, and experiences that the young men and women said shaped their sense of transformative agency.

The research purposes for which case studies are especially suited and their ideal circumstances also affected the selection of this methodology. First, Yin explains that case studies are an ideal method “when (a) ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, (b) the investigator has little control over events, and (c) the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context” (2009, p. 2). Each of these qualifications fits this

study, especially the researcher's lack of control within the proposed data-collection process. Yin points out that how and why questions "deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence" (2009, p. 9). This need for chronology, as opposed to quantity or occurrence, is exactly the frame of this research, which is interested in the influences on these young adults' sense of agency. In this way, "by concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon" (Merriam, 2009, pp. 42–43). Case studies, then, allow the flexibility to explore the phenomenon of youth agency within dynamic contexts and relationships.

Participants, Agency, Connections, and the Beginnings of a Research Project

The focal participants for this study were six young adults: three men and three women, ranging from 23 to 25 years old. In designing the study and conceptualizing transformative agency, I had four of the young adults particularly in mind. This section describes how I came to know these participants, their behaviors and characteristics that led me to frame the inquiry in terms of agency, early conversations about the research, and how the entire group became the focus of the investigation.

I have known Ed and four of the young adults—Adam, Lance, Julie, and Adrian—since the summer of 2009 when I was a graduate student working with a staff member at a local university, who was organizing a youth-violence prevention campaign that brought together teams of adults and youth from local youth organizations. Most of them were seniors in high school at the time. From the summer of 2009 through the spring of 2011, I helped organize and participated in two retreats and biweekly meetings

in which a large group (ranging from 10 to 25 youth and adults) discussed their experiences of violence in their neighborhoods and then planned and launched a campaign for peace. During this time, I learned that Julie, Adrian, Adam and Lance had all been participants in a local church-based, social justice-oriented youth organization. Known in the neighborhood as “Community Church kids” or “Ed’s kids” (although Ed resisted the label), they had been involved in identifying youth needs in the neighborhood, providing programs in response to those needs, and using digital video to document neighborhood events and create public service announcements (PSAs) highlighting local issues. They also participated in several partnerships with other organizations in the metropolitan area. In the youth-violence prevention work, they leveraged the skills they had accumulated as participants at the Youth Space. For example, they helped design, plan, shoot, and edit PSAs; designed programs for community events; and facilitated trainings and collective decision-making processes.

Focusing on Agency

Early on in the work, when Lance, Adrian, Julie and Adam were most deeply involved (2009–10), I observed them in various leadership roles—facilitating meetings, planning and shooting PSAs, and organizing community events. As older youth, they often spoke up on behalf of the younger, newer members in the group. These young adults stood out among their peers and older adults alike. In discussions framing the issues related to youth violence, they readily identified the systems, structures, and power dynamics that contribute to the problems in their neighborhood. Leveraging their familiarity with the issues and the types of conflicts that escalate into violence, they

spoke with confidence and clarity about potential strategies to effect change. They displayed strong leadership skills, a sense of urgency to work against the violence that plagued their neighborhood, and a commitment to share their ideas, even if they countered the dominant ideas in the group. Much like O'Connor (1997), I thought their level of critical consciousness—their understanding of the powerful systems and structures that fed the violence in their neighborhood—might hinder their sense of transformative agency, leading them to question whether they should or could effect change.

Connectedness: Branching Out

The following two years brought a great deal of change in all of our lives, reducing the frequency of our encounters. With college and/or the need for stable work becoming their central priorities, Julie, Lance, Adam, and Adrian attended the youth-violence prevention meetings less often. At the same time, the violence-prevention group was growing smaller and the initiative eventually ended. During this time, I learned that the Youth Space had been closed. Throughout this time of less frequent contact, I continued to cross paths with several of the young adults. Julie gave pointed critiques and feedback in a training-curriculum pilot I co-facilitated, opening up opportunities to collaborate with another organization doing similar work. Lance, who usually leans back in his chair and listens to meetings with his eyes lowered under his straight-brimmed cap, stepped up as a youth panel member at a conference I attended. He offered critical insights and poignant examples about the root causes of youth violence across the metropolitan area. Skimming the newspaper headlines, I noticed Adam and Julie in a

front-page photograph covering a visit from the U.S. Attorney General. These examples illustrate the extensive network these young adults were navigating as they pursued professional opportunities with youth-focused and/or social justice-oriented organizations and initiatives as well as a government council lending youth voices to policy decisions. As will be discussed in the Context chapter, many of these connections stemmed from their involvement at the Youth Space years earlier.

The Beginnings of a Research Project

In 2011, I had brief conversations with some of the young adults in which I expressed interest in telling the story of their journeys for my dissertation research. They were open to the idea. Finding consistent correspondence and planning with the young adults difficult (due to lack of response or follow-up on brief conversations), I reached out to Ed to discuss the idea and help me gather the group. He and I met over breakfast at a local cafe to talk about turning my questions into a research study. He suggested that I should talk with some young adults to see if they were interested. At his recommendation, I prepared the study summary sheet (see Appendix A) for the group to review, in addition to the consent form (see Appendix B.1, B.2). Ed asked Julie to help contact group members. A few weeks later, we met at a nearby buffet restaurant on a Sunday night to talk about the idea. The young adults in attendance were Adam, Michelle, Julie, Adrian, and another young woman who did not participate. Ed, Amy, and Aaron—former youth workers and the young adults’ mentors—were there as well. Ed later explained that he had invited the most recent cohort of youth that had participated in the Youth Space. This was the first time that I met Michelle, and I met Cyreta for the first

time at a separate event. Through the course of the research, I learned that Cyreta and Michelle had both participated at the Youth Space late in high school. Each woman maintained personal relationships with her peers in the group. As described in Chapter 1, I introduced the idea of the study, and the conversation evolved into a rich discussion of ongoing questions and ruminations about the group's shared experiences. At the meeting, the young adults agreed to participate and also said that Lance and Cyreta, who could not attend, should be included. While Ed, Amy, and Aaron were not the focal participants, their ideas are incorporated to help situate, contextualize, or respond to the young adults' ideas.

Researcher Positionality Statement

My relationship to this topic and these young people took shape over several years as I began coursework for my PhD and worked part-time with a university department doing research and training around youth development, which included the youth-violence prevention initiative described above. In the first year of this research, the entire group was quite cohesive and bonds were formed around painful, personal discussions and the vision for our work together. My relationships with Lance, Adam, Julie, and Adrian were warm and sincere. Adrian and I both welcomed our first children within months of each other in 2010, so we often discussed parenting and family issues.

In my presentation of the research topic at the group meeting and in the first round of interviews, I foregrounded my identity as a researcher, highlighting the value of this research for youth-work practice and expressing interest in the uniqueness of the group's experience. My broad understanding of the actors, organizations, and activities

within the professional youth-development community in which some of these young adults worked provided an emic perspective. While the youth-violence prevention work had given me some insight into the neighborhood, I was less familiar with the historical dynamics and nuances that shaped the way these participants view themselves in their neighborhood. In previous interactions with Ed, Adam, Julie, Lance, and Adrian, I expressed consciousness of and openness about my identity as a white, middle-class, female researcher from a nearby suburb. I frequently acknowledged the fact that my experiences were drastically different from many of the lived experiences that youth shared in the violence-prevention meetings. I also aimed to have a collaborative, respectful approach to sharing and creating knowledge, framing myself as a listener and learner.

During the member-check process, the levels of trust and personal awareness discussed above became increasingly superficial and insufficient. Essentially, as I shared “what I thought I heard” them telling me as a listener and learner, we launched into conversations around our shared understanding of the topics. As they elaborated on their ideas, some of the young adults expressed interest in my story and the experiences that informed my inquiry. For example, Julie shared that her decision to work with youth was a “no-brainer...because I don’t know where I would be without you guys [indicating her elders, me, and other youth development professionals she knew]. But for you guys to have made the decision that young people are important and this is what [you are] going to do, without even having the same background, it’s like, it’s, it just makes me wonder, how?” (Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2012). Julie’s question made it evident

that the inequitable level of disclosure in our relationship had become distracting. In responding to Julie's question about my perspective, I shared how I had grown up in a racially homogeneous region of the country, with a "middle-class mentality of, like, 'what do I need from this? What are the experiences I need to gain along the way?....my focus was so narrow growing up, on sports and then college [it] was so linear and there was never this broader like, 'how am I supposed to contribute to the world?' question until much later. Like the clarity you guys had in your early 20s to me is like pretty amazing." Immediately following this point in the conversation, Julie shared the story featured in Chapter 5 about learning a courageous narrative of African American history and how it impacted her. It was apparent that my answer not only met Julie's need to understand my interests, but also made her feel more comfortable sharing even more personal dimensions of her journey.

Later on, the analysis and member-check process confirmed the importance of the young men's and women's racial- and cultural-identity development and their commitments to contribute to a generational struggle for justice. Recognizing this powerful theme prompted a crisis for me that resulted in what is now an ongoing personal transformation. While I was committed to honoring this strand of their reflections, I doubted that I, a white, middle-class woman, should be writing about African American narratives of struggle. The weight of my racial privilege was heavy, and at the same time, I was realizing how whiteness offered no grounding or roots for my own identity, making me feel as though I brought nothing but privilege and guilt to conversations about race. Thanks to a mentor of mine and a local group of European Americans who offered a

workshop on naming, claiming, and exploring cultural identity as a process of dismantling whiteness and healing from that damage that it causes, I had done a good deal of reflection and preparation prior to my member checks about the African American narrative of struggle. In revealing what I thought I heard with the participants, I briefly explained what their sharing had begun for me. The ensuing conversations led to substantive discussions about the need for collective struggle around “human rights,” rather than just “civil rights” (Cyreta, personal communication, January 12, 2014) and the way “white guilt” (Adrian, personal communication, January 29, 2014) exacerbates societal problems. In my conversation with Ed in which I discussed the theme and described my learning, he said that he, Aaron, and Amy had numerous conversations with the youth about “the importance of reclaiming our humanity” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). He went on to draw connections among my own identity development, the findings I had shared with him about the study thus far, and the way he framed a collective struggle around “reclaiming our humanity”:

And we talk a lot about the concept of race being a myth. . . . Everybody says it's about the color of your skin. . . . The purpose of that served is about white ide—, supremacy ideology. Basic bottom line. So racism is what? White supremacy ideology. That is it, you know what I mean? You don't have to jump all around. And so when we talk about the essence of white privilege and so forth, we wanted to teach and we wanted to always communicate that it's about saving humanity. Because most people who claim themselves as white, you've got to understand that is a social

construct and it's a place of privilege. Because you're not white. Tell me your culture. You've got a culture behind you. Where did your grandmother come from? Yeah, Norway. Celebrate that. Wow. That Scandinavian culture, it's rich. And what you gave to humanity, your development, your inventions, your cultural artifacts, that is rich. But white? There's no riches to it. When you start declaring "I'm white," there's no, nothing to it. You're denying yourself of that rich humanity or being a part of humanity. And I think that's the essence of what we were trying to teach, and I think that's why the counternarrative needs to come into play from the young people is that "I haven't discovered my true story." OK? And the true story of humanity that when I fight against racism, you know, I'm not just fighting against white people, quote. I'm fighting against ideology, OK, because we all have culture. (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

Needless to say, the member checks on the theme of African American identity and struggle were confirmed and deepened. Much to my surprise, by recognizing, naming, and beginning to discuss the African American–identity theme while also connecting it to my personal learning, I had tapped into a broader level of discussion and was invited into a collective, human struggle.

This profound level of personal learning went well beyond what I could have anticipated at the beginning of the study. Seeing that cultural identity was a foundation for the clarity and purpose that these young people demonstrated was exciting. It was also

alarming to realize the way whiteness and racism had inhibited my real and perceived capacity to contribute to social-justice scholarship and struggles. Conducting this research while engaging in this process of personal healing and cultural self-discovery has caused me to pose the questions, “How does a lack of cultural identity and groundedness impact the development of European American children and youth? How does this influence the sense of self and ways they operate in the world as adults?” Ethnic-identity discovery helped me realize the importance of this work that goes unnamed and the way so many European American adults and children live and interact without a firm grounding in their cultural identities.

Data-Collection Methods and Procedures

Consistent with the emergent design of this study, each data-collection step was followed by preliminary analysis and member checks that informed the next step. This section illustrates the way the study design changed from a broad emphasis primarily on experiences and relationships that affect agency to a greater focus on the ideas and commitments that inform agency. This shift from a wider, extrinsic to a narrower, more intrinsic understanding of the influences that promote agency resulted from being “sensitive to the data,” as described by Merriam: “the data collection is guided by questions, educated hunches, and emerging findings. . . . Tracking down leads, being open to new insights, and being sensitive to the data are the same whether the researcher is interviewing, observing, or analyzing documents (2009, p. 150).

Interviews and member checks were used to collect data. The former were guided conversations or “conversations with purpose,” in which “the researcher elicits depth and

detail about the research topic by following up on answers given by the interviewee during the discussion” (Dexter, 1970, cited in Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p. 268; Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4). Rubin and Rubin describe two overarching categories of interviews: cultural and topical interviews. Whereas cultural interviews start with little structure and ask wide-ranging questions to uncover what is important or relevant to the topic as the conversation unfolds, topical interviews start with clearer objectives for what the researcher seeks to learn from the discussion (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Member checks involve sharing data and initial analyses with participants so they can “verify that the research adequately represents their perspectives and experiences” (Stringer, 2007, p. 58). This study extended the use of member checks as a means to gather additional data, which helped clarify or deepen emerging themes and probe further about the relevance of underdeveloped themes. Altogether, this additional data guided subsequent study design decisions.

From Breadth to Depth Early On: Interview One

The first interview was essentially a topical one that sought to “explore what, when, how, why, or with what consequence something happened” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p.11). Its protocol (see Appendix C.1) was designed with the following goals:

1. To get a sense of the landscape of the participants’ personal and professional relationships and networks; and
2. To begin to discuss whether and how those relationships and networks impacted their sense of agency.

Within two to four weeks after the initial group meeting, the first individual interviews with all six of the focal participants were conducted; however, one was a paired interview that included Lance and Adam. Following the interviews, I wrote field notes describing the context of our meeting, the tone, and any relevant informal conversation that led up to the interview itself. In each interview, the interviewees had a tendency to respond more enthusiastically and in more depth to questions aimed at the second goal. In fact, even the questions aimed toward defining key people and organizations received brief answers, often followed by stories, commentaries, and explanations of why and how those connections were important. For example, in responding to a question about a current job(s), the answer would often include details of who, what, and where followed by a detailed description of the participant's approach or aspects of the work he or she was most committed to (i.e., supporting youth in voicing their concerns or developing trusting relationships with youth). Given the enthusiasm with which the young men and women talked about these *why* and *how* details and their inclination to move the conversation toward the second goal related to agency, I anticipated that the second interview would elicit rich stories that might begin to illustrate what informed this sense of agency.

I reviewed the transcripts of the first interviews while sketching maps of the key people, experiences, and organizations that the young adults mentioned as something they were currently involved with, a previous affiliation, or an impactful moment and/or relationship. I also noted key themes for each interviewee but did not yet begin to draw themes across interviews. In mapping the young adults' various affiliations and

relationships that they said were important to them, I realized that most of the connections originated with their participation in activities at the Youth Space (with the exception of Michelle, who had leveraged relationships with school staff to connect to meaningful opportunities). In addition, in describing the ideas and experiences that impacted their sense of agency, they most often referenced the organization as an important center for learning. Based on these observations, I wondered if the young adults' sense of agency for social change was rooted in fewer, more personal relationships, rather than broader, professional relationships.

Following a Hunch: Interview Two

In light of the young men's and women's tendency to discuss their meaning-making processes as they considered past experiences and ongoing decision-making, the second round of interviews tested the idea that their sense of agency was more rooted in core values and commitments, instead of their connectedness to people and organizations. The network-connectedness "hypothesis" was not abandoned at the outset, but the planned interview protocol (see Appendix C.2) was used to elicit stories of critical incidents—"significant occurrences (events, incidents, processes, or issues) identified by the respondent [that explore] the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects," in this case, the development of participants' agency for social change (Gremler, 2004, citing Chell, 1988, p. 56). I had also prepared a set of questions that, should the participants continue toward depth and meaning-making, would "follow" what Merriam called an "educated hunch" (2009, p. 150).

Three young adults (Adam, Lance, and Julie) responded to the request for a second interview. In all three interviews, only one or two specific stories came to mind. When they were asked questions that attempted to “zoom in” in order to flesh out the details of the stories (i.e., who was there, what was said, etc.), the young adults either said they could not remember or responded with short, direct responses and seemed to disengage from the conversation. Instead of pushing for stories, I asked deeper questions about the more personal and philosophical reflections they were readily contributing. In short, the goal of eliciting critical incidents was altered to delve more deeply into their experiences and how those moments impacted their beliefs that they could and should effect change. In fact, in the second interview with Julie, she changed the conversation from “zooming in” on specific stories to “zooming out,” saying, “I would say there isn’t big stories, but there’s definitely times in my life . . . where I had to make a choice or when I was influencing other people, or stuff was going on around me. . . . You create change around it from there” (Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2013). She went on to share a story about how thinking about her “purpose” helped her make a change in her professional career (the story is included in Chapter 8). In summary, the second interview elicited a few stories and critical incidents but then assumed the tone of a less structured, in-depth cultural interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Focusing on Roots More Than Branches

The analysis process prompted a modification in the research questions and design from a focus on networks and relationships as developing agency to ideas and relationships as informing agency. In the end, the network-mapping that had initially

interested me became context rather than findings. Although subsequent member checks would be required to be certain, it seemed that the young adults were explaining that the network was more a vehicle than a driver of their agency for social change. This confirmation through the analysis process also marked a focusing of data-collection methods. Rather than conducting observations and gathering documents about critical incidents (branching out into the network), I used member checks, which doubled as interviews, to explore the deeper, more intrapersonal data related to agency for social change that the previous interviews had yielded.

Iterative Analysis and Member Checks

As already discussed, ongoing analysis was central to the decisions made throughout the study. Miles and Huberman assert that cycles of interim analysis can “point to improved data collection . . . [and] lead to successively deeper, fuller waves of analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 86). On transcribing the second individual interviews and importing them into a qualitative data-analysis program (MAXQDA), I entered into those “deeper, fuller waves of analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 86). At this point, I temporarily set aside the network maps as guiding the inquiry and delved into the interview data. This important step required letting go of my vision for the study and “following the data.” Whereas the research was expected to trace the branches of a network that fostered and informed their agency, it was now exploring the roots of that agency.

I adopted the constant comparative method (Merriam 2009, p. 159) in analyzing the data. The method entails several phases of creating categories for the data and then

comparing those categories to one another. In the first phase, the data were coded descriptively, using labels that described what the interviewee was talking about (i.e., family, school, key elder, “ah-hah” moment, “values”). When coding stories and longer reflections, I often labeled the codes using the participants’ own words as a synopsis for the story. This step was an effort to avoid drawing my own interpretations at this early phase of analysis. I created a memo describing what each code entailed. At this point, I had few categories and subcategories but a long list of codes that grew longer with each interview. By the time I finished coding the first individual interviews (n=6), I was adding fewer new codes. I then began creating categories for the existing codes by comparing and grouping them based on what they had in common. For example, the macro code “worldview/philosophy” came from combining several smaller codes. The excerpt below from my researcher’s journal describes the development of the macro code:

I had a code called “jobhow” that I created alongside a “jobwhat” code. “Jobwhat” captured the logistical/descriptive element of their work—where they work, their title, what they do (i.e., who they work with and what they are responsible for). The “jobhow” code was my attempt to distinguish more objective description of “jobwhat” from more detailed, nuanced information about an individual’s approach to their work—the unique perspectives that shaped how they do their work, how the[y] relate with leadership and with youth, what they prioritize in their work, etc. This often got at the “why” of their work and captured some of their

motivations and passions related to what they were doing. . . . I also had a code, “philosophy,” to capture stories or examples in which interviewees were trying to describe how they view their work, how they think people should be treated, and some foundational ideas that ground their approach to what they get involved in and how and why they contribute to various initiatives. . . . Later, another interviewee . . . had a strong opinion about “how things should be done.” In a way, she was being more direct and articulate about the same idea that my code of “jobhow” was trying to capture. So there’s obviously overlap there, but I didn’t worry much about that overlap and just continued coding. . . . [Another participant] used the words “values” to describe the foundation for how he did his work. So I created a values code, which captured both ideas that grounded his work, but also his life in general and how he related to others.

After creating these larger, eight categories and grouping most of the descriptive codes into them, I delved into each of the macro groupings to tease out the different dimensions or ideas within each one. When possible, I continued to add the young adults’ words to label these mid-level codes, each of which had a detailed code memo to summarize the essence of that code—how it related to the “macro” code and what made it unique from other mid-level codes. About twenty detailed themes emerged around what had informed the young adults’ sense of agency.

At this point, a member check was performed to be sure that this early analysis resonated with the young adults. On half sheets of paper, I wrote each theme in statement

form (e.g., “Having leadership opportunities is really important”; see Appendix E for the list of themes), at times along with similar ideas in bullet form underneath the main statement. Michelle and Adrian attended the first meeting. I placed the sheets on a wall and asked them to take a few minutes to review them. Our conversation invited general reflections, and then asked them to select and discuss two or three themes that seemed especially vital to them and if they disagreed with any statements or if any did not make sense. In the conversations that followed, Michelle and Adrian offered additional comments, examples, and stories related to the most significant themes for them. They often responded to one another and built off each other’s ideas. They said none of the themes was inaccurate. In stepping back and looking at the wall, Michelle noted the extent to which they were all connected. In a subsequent one-on-one member check with Julie, I used the same approach, and her feedback also provided more nuance to the existing themes. At each of these member-check meetings, I also shared a handout to remind the young adults about the goals of the research project, the timeline, and other details (see Appendix D).

Affirmed by Adrian’s, Michelle’s, and Julie’s feedback, I transcribed the member-check meeting recordings and analyzed them just as I had done with the first and second interviews. I diagrammed the data and entered another phase of comparison of mid-level themes, grouping them into more nuanced “macro” themes and distilling down their various strands. Drawing on theme memos and illustrative quotes, I started to write about the highest-level themes and the intermediate ones within them. Through iterative phases of writing, diagramming, and revisiting of the coding, the larger theme categories

became more detailed and their nuances more apparent. The thinking and writing were anchored by these primary categories: 1) Values/commitments; 2) Nature of Experiences, Elder Relationships, and Powerful Moments; and 3) Navigating Now. These categories form the core of Chapters 6, 7, and 8. However, one category wove through numerous stories and reflections but was not coherently represented. It pertained to African American history and culture and a strong identification with the neighborhood that included anger and frustration about outside assumptions about the neighborhood. In reviewing the member-check transcripts, particularly one of Julie's stories, which is featured in Chapter 5, and at the urging of my faculty adviser, I probed deeper into this category. Although tentative at first, the more I revisited transcripts and stories, the more I realized that the young adults were highlighting important moments in their racial- and cultural-identity development that took place at the Youth Space. This growth lent a sense of belonging to their community and to a narrative of struggle. This theme constitutes some of the deepest roots for several of the young adults' identities as change agents.

Given the deep level of analysis and interpretation that yielded the extremely personal theme relating to identity and an African American counternarrative, another round of member checks was conducted. Furthermore, considering the extensive writings about each core theme, this was a key time to ask for the young adults' feedback on all of the findings. I spoke to Adrian, individually, and to Cyreta and Adam together. I also corresponded with Julie via e-mail. In explaining the key areas of the writing, I was especially deliberate about describing the identity and counternarrative theme, which

drew explicitly on their stories and examples. I also shared excerpts of the chapters, particularly their stories and examples, along with my unpacking and interpretation. The participants read the excerpts and commented not only on the accuracy of details but also the adequacy of the analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Stringer, 2007). The young adults' feedback again confirmed that the research was heading in the right direction and sometimes provided more details and illustrative examples. During this phase of member checking, I also outlined the key findings along with examples for Ed. With each idea I shared, he expressed affirmation of the theme and understanding of the young adults' words. He went on to extend and respond to each central theme by describing his approach and priorities at the Youth Space. Essentially, these ideas situate many of the young adults' ideas, relationships, and experiences.

Following this important round of member checks, I proceeded with more confidence while revising the findings chapters. I then printed the findings chapters, along with a cover page outlining my request (see Appendix F) for the young adults and Ed to read the findings and hand-delivered them to most of the participants. At the time of this writing, I had received constructive feedback from four of six participants as well as from Ed.

Trustworthiness Procedures

This study adopts Lincoln and Guba's suggested techniques for establishing trustworthiness, using criteria that include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (1985). The credibility criterion is rooted in the understanding that there are multiple constructions of reality, and it calls for the researcher to show that he or she

has *represented those multiple constructions adequately*, that is, that the *reconstructions* (for the findings and interpretations are also constructions, it should never be forgotten) that have been arrived at via the inquiry *are credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296, emphasis in original).

The participants viewed me as a professional acquaintance. Our one-on-one conversations built trust and collegiality related to youth-development and social-justice topics. In early conversations, we discussed the potential mutual benefits of the research, particularly the adaptability of the findings to other formats and audiences. We have yet to revisit these conversations as member checks have focused largely on the content of the findings. In the months following the completion of this dissertation, I look forward to again discussing their potential uses. As Lincoln and Guba suggest, I see building trust as “a developmental process to be engaged in daily” that has involved continually assessing and articulating my role as the researcher and the relationships I establish with participants (1985, p. 303).

Employing a reflexive researcher’s journal helped articulated the assumptions and theories that had been formed in designing the study in order to expose any potential distortions that the researcher brings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The journal also outlined daily activities on the project, captured my thinking and how it evolved, and recorded methodological decisions at each juncture (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I aimed to be attentive to the expectations, motivations, and perceptions that might lead the study participants to intentionally distort their responses, and I engaged in persistent

observation by repeatedly reviewing the data, journaling, and creating tentative codes and categories for my observations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The member checks, described above, support credibility as they provide a means to verify what the respondent intended to communicate, correct errors or misinterpretations, urge the researcher to summarize the data, and give the respondent a chance to speak to the adequacy of the broader summaries and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As articulated in my data-collection procedures, member checks were taken through informal conversations and questions in individual or group interviews throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Toward the end of the analysis process, some participants read and responded to the write-up to ensure that their ideas and contributions were represented accurately.

Transferability is a second trustworthiness standard, and it relates to the ease with which findings from a given study can apply to a similar context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher's contribution to fulfilling this criterion is to provide thick description and "set out working hypotheses together with a description of the time and context in which they were found to hold . . . [with the] . . . responsibility to provide the *data base* that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316, emphasis in original). The context chapter of this dissertation along with the detailed background information woven throughout the findings provides insight into the setting within which this study is conducted. Through careful examination of the influences that the young adults identify as important to their sense of agency, I delved deeply into how these ideas, relationships, and experiences

made a difference and impacted how they voyage through young adulthood. This attention to context provides a strong data base for the potential transfer of some findings to similar contexts, especially for youth workers, educators, and researchers to understand some influences on youth agency.

Dependability and confirmability overlap somewhat with credibility in that they address the quality of the data-collection process and the accuracy of the findings with respect to the data themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Keeping a researcher's journal along with the various documentation and initial analysis procedures outlined above helped keep track of the process of the study, the methodological decisions, and the choices to include or exclude various sources of data. Lincoln and Guba suggest conducting a "inquiry audit," (1985, p. 316 citing Guba, 1981), in which another researcher or auditor reviews the process by which the study was conducted as well as the data, findings, and recommendations, and "attests that it is supported by data and is internally coherent so that the 'bottom line' may be accepted" (1985, p. 318). This dissertation supplies detailed descriptions of the procedures used to collect and analyze the data and sufficient amounts of data to demonstrate to the dissertation committee that the research process is dependable and that the findings are confirmable and warranted. This approach draws on the committee's expertise to audit the study.

Delimitations and Limitations

While the findings from this study may relate to other young adults' experiences, the goal is not to generalize to different populations but to illuminate nuanced, deeply contextual, and dynamic social processes that have fostered a sense of agency for social

change among these unique youth. Rather than seeking to generalize broadly to other situations and settings, this study aims to provide depth and detail so that the findings can be transferred to similar settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, this study addressed the young adults' reflections on a long-term learning and personal-development process that was shaped by multiple factors. Consistent with the constructivist approach, the study, which was not longitudinal, focused on the recollections of young adult participants on the significant features of their paths as social-change agents, demonstrating an appreciation for the meanings they make and the realities they actively construct and reconstruct over time.

A limitation of the study was the time that lapsed between first interviews and the member-checks. The sense of momentum and buy-in established at the first group meeting supported the participants' timely responses to my requests for individual interviews. As a result, much of the data were collected early on in the project, between March and June of 2012. Due to personal circumstances, I was unable to return to the research until the spring of 2013. I had informed the group that I would be setting the research aside temporary and remained in touch with them about my circumstances. However, in such a dynamic phase of their lives and amidst all of their personal and professional obligations, many of the young adults were more difficult to reach for member-checks and some needed a reminder of the study topic. However, this distance also contributed depth and nuance to the themes that were then discussed during the member-check meetings. Participants elaborated upon those themes that especially

resonated with them, often sharing examples from their most recent professional and personal experiences.

Chapter Four: Study Context

Context is key in this study, considering its critical-constructivist grounding, its qualitative method that encourages the young adults' candid contributions throughout the process, and its detailed analysis—all leveraged toward understanding dynamic processes of personal, moral, and civic development among a group of unique individuals. The first section of this chapter provides a background on the city and the neighborhood where focal participants grew up and where the church that housed the Youth Space was located. The second section describes the evolution of the Youth Space, also introducing some of Ed's approaches to his work. It includes examples of the types of activities the youth were engaged in and that they referenced in their stories and reflections about influences on their sense of agency. The final section presents individual summaries of each young adult's background, including his or her family composition, childhood experiences in school, and challenges faced and opportunities pursued while navigating early adulthood. Again, these condensed versions of their journeys illustrate each young adult's unique personality and pursuits, while helping to situate the stories and reflections presented in the subsequent chapters.

The City and Neighborhood

This research study took place a large Midwestern city. The surrounding state and slightly more than half of its population is made up of European Americans. The city itself, however, is quite diverse. It is home to large American Indian and African American populations as well as immigrants from Central America and refugees from Africa and Southeast Asia. With a robust social services sector and a long history of civic

engagement and activism, the metropolitan area has numerous community and nonprofit organizations that focus on the needs of youth. The neighborhood, where the six study participants were raised and where the Youth Space is located, has a large African American population.

Compared to the rest of the nation, the state boasts several strengths, including high public high school graduation rates (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014) and high levels of home ownership (Institute for Child, Youth, & Family Policy, n.d.). However, these successes are problematic, considering the fact that these indicators of human and financial capital do not bear out for the African American population. In fact, the state is the second lowest in the nation for the rate of African Americans graduating from high school, currently 51 percent, while the rate for white students is 84 percent (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Homeownership follows a similar trajectory, with the state ranking among the highest in the nation at 77.1% and yet only 26.2% of African Americans own homes (Institute for Child, Youth, & Family Policy, n.d.). These vast inequities raise critical questions and create an overarching frame for this study about well-connected African American young adults and the influences that made them think they could and should effect change in their community and struggle for social justice.

These trends mentioned above were evident in the young adults' individual stories, discussed below, as well as in the collective narrative communicated in the Findings chapters. The young adults spoke of their families' financial struggles, housing insecurity, safety concerns, and frustration with neighborhood schools. However, they mentioned these challenges only in passing. They more often pointed out the positives in

their lives, and their stories painted a picture of an abundance of accumulated social capital. For example, they all said that both of their parents (in one case, a step-parent) played a significant role in their lives, an involvement that they recognized as unique compared to many peers who grew up without one or more parents being involved in their lives. In addition, many young people noted trusted adults in their extended families or from the neighborhood, who had taken an interest in them and communicated high expectations for their futures. Prior to their involvement in the Youth Space, several of the youth had participated in after-school and summer programs. One after-school program based in neighborhood elementary and junior high schools espoused a leadership model in which former participants became program leaders. Four of the six study participants held high school and/or early career jobs through this after-school program.

The young adults in this study identified strongly with their neighborhood, communicating a sense of belonging, rootedness, and pride. They referenced their family history in the community and acknowledged the generations before them who also called the area home. Remembering growing up in the neighborhood, the young men and women communicated a feeling of being known and watched over, due in part to having extended family nearby. For example, Michelle recalled, “As a kid, I couldn’t walk out the house acting a fool, without somebody being like, ‘Oh, I know your family. You should act right.’ And it getting back to somebody in my family” (Michelle, personal communication, May 19, 2013).

The Church and Youth Space

The church that housed the youth program is located at the heart of the neighborhood, off one of its busiest streets, in a simple brick building. While the front entrance had wide steps leading to double doors, most traffic on weekdays came through the back doors, where one entered and wound through the various corridors to meeting rooms upstairs and a basement with a kitchen and dining area, along with what used to be the Youth Space. Although the pseudonym “Community Church” is used in this study, the church’s real name reflects its rootedness in Afrocentric ideology and its commitment to social action. Community Church took an active role in the neighborhood, often partnering with other organizations to address needs ranging from youth development to health education and safety. The church was deliberate about being a welcoming and affirming place where all neighborhood youth could be physically, emotionally, and spiritually present (Ed, personal communication, August 8, 2014). A concrete illustration of the church’s openness, the youth would often work in various spaces throughout the building, including the sanctuary and, sometimes, even the pastor’s office (Ed, personal communication, August 8, 2014).

Ed’s initial employment with Community Church nearly twenty years ago marked the beginning of a deliberate focus on serving youth. A few years later, Aaron began volunteering at the Youth Space. He had been a youth participant in Ed’s program in another neighborhood years earlier. Aaron explicitly sought out Ed’s mentorship at the Youth Space and was later hired on as staff. Next, Amy was hired to lead a support group for females. The first offerings Ed introduced at the church included summer Freedom

Schools for younger children and an open hangout space for teens. Later, Ed expanded opportunities for teens. He engaged older teens to lead mentorship groups for younger youth. Adrian described the arrangement as “intergenerational mentorship” (Adrian, personal communication, January 29, 2014), referring to the manner in which the elders guided and supported the youth leaders. Ed started a small videography business to document the community’s history as well as engage youth as apprentices and teach them valuable skills. He drew on his extensive personal and professional network to garner video projects and foster partnerships on a variety of youth and community-related initiatives. Many of these partnerships led to sustained collaborations and additional opportunities for youth involvement. The young men and women in this study were in high school when the scope and variety of opportunities for teen involvement and leadership expanded. Shortly thereafter, they graduated from high school, Community Church’s priorities shifted, and the emphasis on youth development was reduced, though a focus on youth-violence prevention remained. Ed, Amy, and Aaron moved on to work for other organizations.

Freedom Schools

The Freedom Schools movement is rooted in the American civil-rights struggle. During the summer of 1964, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) launched a program to educate and organize blacks in Mississippi to take political action for citizenship rights (Children’s Defense Fund, 2012a). Activities included voter registration and mock voting, the teaching of various subjects to compensate for the poor schooling that black students

received, and the modeling of critical engagement in communities (Children's Defense Fund, 2012a). The Children's Defense Fund took up the Freedom Schools movement in 1992 in the form of the CDF Freedom Schools program, which created a curriculum focused on “[h]igh quality academic enrichment, [p]arent and family involvement, [s]ocial action and civic engagement, [i]ntergenerational servant leadership development, [n]utrition, health and mental health” (Children's Defense Fund, 2012b). The young adults in this study talked most about the six-week summer Freedom Schools, but, as discussed below, the Youth Space elders drew on the curriculum in their year-round work.

Ed discovered the CDF Freedom Schools program when he was looking for ways to engage younger children who were hanging out at the Youth Space, often tagging along with their older siblings. Under his leadership, the church became a host site for the Freedom Schools program. While offerings for younger children were important, Ed said that implementing the Intergenerational Servant Leadership component of the curriculum invigorated the programming for older youth. Being a junior servant leader entailed leadership training, connecting with participants, and assisting the main teachers in delivering the curriculum. According to the CDF website, the servant leader component aims toward “fostering an understanding of connection between effective programs and public policy, and the importance of community development, political advocacy, and coalition building” (Children's Defense Fund, 2012b). Ed commented on how the role gave older youth “a sense of purpose and affirmed them in getting involved,” and he highlighted the additional level of depth that Aaron brought to the position as he

mentored the youth and engaged them in critical conversations about local black history and contemporary issues in the community (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). Ed also emphasized the importance of the Freedom Schools' "model of affirmation, . . . model of celebration, . . . [and] model of encouragement and direction" (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014) that he also embraced in his other work at the Youth Space. He pointed out that, for many young adults, their participation was

their first time they've ever been in a community [of] accountability, where there was direct affirmation given to them. People celebrated them. They felt like "Wow, I am really needed and wanted here!" . . . It's a really intentional way to affirm that you have value and you're part of it. And that your creativity is needed. (Ed, personal communication, January 2014)

As is evident in the first Findings chapter, several young adults said that this model of affirmation and the message that their contributions were needed in the African American and human struggle for social justice fostered a desire to affect change.

Five of the six young adults in this study participated in the Freedom Schools. Michelle recalled a family friend urging her to attend and she "just went along with [her] brothers . . . [and assumed she] was just going so I would stay in school"—a comment that likely reflects the focus on literacy (Michelle, personal communication, March 15, 2012). Adam said that his family, especially his older cousins, communicated an expectation that he participate. He was bored and dropped out his first summer, but returned after Ed offered him a leadership position, a role that, along with Aaron's

mentorship and guidance, fostered Adam's engagement. Julie, Adam, Lance, and Adrian pointed to one particular year—the summer prior to their entrance into high school when the group participated in a pilot of the high-school-level Freedom Schools' curriculum—as cementing their relationships and their commitments to serve their community and struggle for change. The story of that summer is featured in the third Findings chapter. Since their time as participants and junior servant leaders, several young adults have been employed as site coordinators and in other leadership positions with Freedom Schools.

Ed's Approach to Youth Work

Understanding some of Ed's beliefs and approaches to his work contextualizes the findings about the influences on the young adults' sense of agency for social change. As part of the member checking process, I met with Ed to share the central findings of the study. In the back and forth of our conversation, I summarized each of the four Findings chapters, sometimes providing illustrative quotes and examples, and Ed responded, restating what he heard in terms of conversations he recalled having with the youth, situating specific stories in the broader contexts, and articulating his visions and intentions, reported below.

Parish Concept

With a background in youth development and in ministry, Ed recalled entering his work at the church with a very flexible agenda. He named the “parish concept” among the anchoring concepts for his work, explaining that he viewed all “young people in a certain geographical area as being [the church's] in the sense of being somebody who [the church] want[ed] to serve. . . . Versus, like, once you join us and then [the church]'ll

serve you” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). Acting on this vision meant drawing in youth, regardless of background, some of whom became more involved and “stuck around” and many of whom just “passed through” the Teen Center and eventually left. Adrian recalled that numerous gang-affiliated youth participated at the Youth Space, illustrating the inherent fluidity in applying the parish concept to engaging youth. This study brought to the surface some of the factors that led this particular group of young men and women to stay.

Not “Do[ing] Programming”

Ed emphasized his commitment to not “do programming” at the Youth Space (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). Departing from the common approach of establishing programs and then inviting youth to participate, Ed explained his method as “identify[ing] young people and their needs and I’ll develop whatever program they need to be successful.” He continued, “We engage young people and then we develop the tools and the delivery systems they need to be successful. That becomes our program” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). Youth and their needs were at the center of Ed’s approach, and he mentored and worked with Aaron and Amy to implement that vision. Starting from the youth—their personalities, needs, and strengths—the first step was engaging them and then helping them think about, plan, and accomplish their goals. As the Findings chapters illustrate, several young adults said the elders’ flexibility and openness were important for fostering the youths’ sense of agency for social change. Lance recalled Ed’s approach as setting aside his expertise, ideas, and plans, and asking, “What do you guys want to do?” (Lance, personal communication, April 27, 2012).

Lance marveled, “That’s, like, profound. . . . You’ve pretty much set everything that you know on the back burner for the benefit of, of other minds being able to flourish and grow” (Lance, personal communication, April 27, 2012). Resisting a preplanned program flipped a dominant idea of youth development upside down.

Not “Claiming These Kids”: The Network of Opportunities

The young adults often referenced how their involvement at the Youth Space led to other opportunities to enact their sense of agency within and beyond their neighborhood. While this study initially sought to trace these webs of opportunities, the responses made it clear that the network was a vehicle for, more so than an influence on, their sense of agency for social change. The young adults casually mentioned how these connections were made while talking most passionately and in-depth about the *what*—the ideas and experiences that these opportunities exposed them to—as having influenced their sense of agency. While the findings chapters illuminate the content—the ideas, experiences, and relationships—that the young people said influenced their sense of agency, this section describes the ways in which the young adults came to have access to the diverse associations and alliances that many of them are now employing in young adulthood.

The vast network of opportunities was, in part, the result of the elders acting out their commitment to not do programming, but to respond to youths’ needs by “develop[ing] the tools and the delivery systems they need to be successful” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). Listening to the youths’ desires and finding ways to engage their interests often led the elders to partner with organizations that were

doing the activities youth were interested in or that could provide the expertise and training the youth needed to accomplish their goals. As a respected, long-time, youth-development professional, Ed had trusting relationships with other practitioners, funders, community organizers, religious and cultural organizations, and schools. Ed, Aaron, and Amy had inside knowledge of budding community developments and brought youth to the table, often before clearly delineated tasks or goals had been created. Ed mentioned that, as some organizational partnerships evolved into sustained opportunities for youth, he, Aaron, and Amy had thoughtful conversations about the match between organizational approaches and the youths' needs and strengths. This early involvement allowed the youth to lend their voices in formative conversations, some of which evolved into broader, sustained initiatives and partnerships.

As the youth grew older and their needs evolved, Ed, Aaron, and Amy drew on existing connections, sought out new opportunities, or encouraged the youth to get involved with other organizations, even offering rides to meetings and events unrelated to Youth Space. Ed asserted that his approach of "not claiming these kids" meant caring enough about them to put their interests before those of the organization. He strongly critiqued the common tendency among youth organizations to discourage involvement with other groups (often under pressure to prove high attendance in order to maintain funding). Ed stated emphatically, "Well, they're not our kids" (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). He expressed anger that other organizations' fears about "los[ing] out" would lead them to "degrade and limit the opportunities for [youth]. . . . You know, they don't shine where they need to shine. They don't grow where they

need to grow” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). Ed said that he, Aaron, and Amy “emphasized over and over and over again that opportunities are out there” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). Elaborating on the broad scope and concrete forms of the elders’ encouragement, Ed said, “if [person’s name] wants you to sit on the [Youth Council] more, bless him. How can we support that? ‘You need a ride?’ I’ll drive you over there, you know. What can we do to help you to grow from that and enter that new phase of your life?” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). He also pointed out that urging the youth to explore other opportunities was part of “recognizing [the Youth Space’s] limitations” as his group could not offer the equipment and facilities that other organizations could (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014).

With opportunities for involvement in 1) stand-alone Youth Space small groups, 2) organizational partnerships and collaborative efforts or short-term video projects, and 3) the individual youths’ own pursuits that were encouraged and supported by their Youth Space elders, the high schoolers were quite busy. Ed often offered them modest compensation for their work. Starting in high school, several youth had held other part-time jobs, some leading the school-based after-school programs that they had participated in as children. Many were also junior servant leaders in the summer Freedom Schools. By the time the young adults neared high school graduation, they had been exposed to a broad network of youth development professionals in the metropolitan area. Several young adults began independently pursuing opportunities in this network. Often, the young men and women remained formally (through organizational partnerships) or informally (through mentorship) connected to their Youth Space elders.

Several of the young adults' involvement in the creation of what is now the local Youth Council offers an illustrative example of the way Ed's connections led to opportunities that "snowballed" (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012) into ongoing involvement for many of the young men and women. Ed brought several youth "to the table" when a local public official invited him into early conversations about creating a committee of youth to inform city policy (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2012). Over several years, these conversations evolved into the Youth Council, which was housed in the city's government. The young men and women in this study helped form, then served on, and now consult with the Youth Council to help gather information for policy decisions. Their contributions to the council spawned numerous citywide initiatives to support youth. Throughout the process of shaping and contributing to this city's policy arm, Ed and the youth developed relationships with key leaders. A prominent youth development professional, Paula, headed up the formal establishment of the Youth Council. She also invited Ed and the youth into her work with the social justice-oriented youth organization Go Peace. Part of Go Peace's mission was to carry out local activities related to a national and global peace and social-justice movement. Ed and the youth participated in some of its local and national peace-building events. They later became increasingly involved with Go Peace's year-round activities related to youth leadership and advocacy. Through these collaborations, the youth gained leadership and facilitation skills as well as developed and/or were trained in youth-focused curricula. During the course of this study, many in the group were utilizing these skills to moderate meetings that would gather information and recommendations from

youth to advise policy makers. They were also training high-school-age youth in the skills and curriculum that they had learned. Finally, they were helping Go Peace develop partnerships with other organizations to deliver trainings, curricula, and organize events. The rich professional network Ed and, later, Paula, connected them to become a vehicle for some of the young adults to live out their commitments and work with people who shared their vision for social justice and community work. At different times during this study, Julie, Adam, Lance, and Cyreta had been involved in this professional network. The final Findings chapter, *Navigating Now*, discusses some of their experiences, and the individual stories below summarize the young men and women's backgrounds and the avenues that each person pursued in young adulthood.

Adam

Adam, now 23 at the time of writing this study, lived in the city his entire life with his mother, father, and extended family. While he did not talk much about his family, Adam communicated his respect for both of his parents. He credited his mother, whom he described as passionate about social issues and her racial identity, with raising his consciousness about those concepts. Adam said his father was more concerned about "keeping the lights on" (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012), describing him as "real concrete, earth science is what [he] call[s] it" (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012). Directly communicating his expectations and advice to his son, Adam's father had urged him to attend college and was angry when Adam unexpectedly dropped out after his first semester. At the time of our conversations, Adam was trying to "get on the same page" (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012) with his father about

financial aid and paying off his student loans, so that he could pursue college again. His father was reluctant to share the family's financial information and Adam's description of how he needed to approach his father revealed the nature of the men's relationship: "no matter how much work in the community that I do, at the end of the day I'm still his son, so like, he doesn't see all of, like, ... I could be this huge person in the community but when I approach him, you know, I'm always, I'm always humbled" (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

Adam attended junior high and high school in nearby suburbs. Creative and intellectually driven, he said he did well in school but became disengaged after experiencing the racial disparities between the different tracks in his middle school. He excelled in mainstream classes and teachers suggested he enter the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. He recalled, "in mainstream, I was with my homies and in IB, I was with all white kids. . . . I failed miserably. I guess I felt alienated and lost interest" (Adam, personal communication, February 12, 2014). Joining the Youth Space after middle school, Adam emphasized its intellectual engagement and mentorship, particularly through his relationship with Aaron. His close friendships, sense of solidarity, and shared experiences with his peers at the Youth Space were also important to him. Soft-spoken and thoughtful, Adam talked about the ongoing process of exploring his identity as an African American man.

While Adam had initially envisioned college as an opportunity to explore his identity, he pointed out that he had become a lot more "self-aware," as he got back on his feet after leaving college and pursuing career opportunities in youth development (Adam,

personal communication, March 8, 2012). He said he enjoyed writing and found a creative outlet in poetry. During the course of the study, he began performing spoken word and recording music. At the beginning of the study, he had worked with several youth-development organizations in the city, assumed leadership roles, and become increasingly involved in teaching and training in schools. Toward the end, he had taken a full-time job as a school paraprofessional, one that he said paid well and included benefits. In addition, he was working in the evenings at the Community Church doing youth programs and also led the summer Freedom School there.

Adrian

Adrian attended elementary school in the city before his family moved in with relatives in Chicago to rebuild their finances. His extended family was involved in gangs, and Adrian said he did not question getting involved himself since everyone was doing it. Adrian's father could not find a job in Chicago, and the violence in their neighborhood drove the family back to the Midwestern city, where they lived in shelters, moved from house to house, and eventually became "more stable" (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012). Adrian acknowledged the importance of his family facing challenges together, saying, "I knew Dad was going to be there. I knew Mom was going to be there. We may cry some nights, but I knew that Dad was there" (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012). Adrian pointed out that his parents had been married for over 25 years, and he recalled surprise at learning that "dads wasn't a part of the family of African Americans" (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012).

An intelligent young man, Adrian enjoyed thinking deeply and debating societal issues. In almost every story about important moments in his life, he discussed the implications for his faith and his understanding of ideas like forgiveness and mercy. When I asked if his style of discussing topics had found an outlet at school, he responded quickly, “I didn’t like school. I couldn’t stand school. I didn’t graduate high school. . . . I was in Special Ed ever since kindergarten. Um, that’s the crazy part. I don’t know my diagnosis” (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012). Adrian spoke with confidence about his dream of teaching history, focusing specifically on African American history, a career choice that was shaped considerably by the Youth Space and Freedom Schools. He said, “[They] just opened my eyes though to history . . . where I came from, where we came from as a people and how we’re, where we’re going to and learning what the people before me, you know, gave up for I could have this opportunity” (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012). “I’m going to be a teacher, but, like, I can’t move on my career, my endeavors, without me doing [the GED],” Adrian said. Having taken the examination several times, Adrian said he excelled in all sections except the written one because he struggles to write his ideas on paper. Since he types his ideas with ease, he hoped to take the computerized exam.

Adrian recalled hanging out at the Youth Space in elementary school and being sent home before curfew when the room became a space for teens only. On moving back from Chicago and becoming a teen himself, Adrian crossed paths with Ed near the church. Ed recognized him and told him about a program he had started. Adrian said since then he participated in various programs and initiatives Ed had created. The work of

being a community documentarian through Ed's videography apprenticeship was where Adrian felt he had the most impact. He highlighted how hearing peoples' stories of struggle, from a local mother who lost her son to gun violence to a Nobel Laureate speaking of her incarceration and oppression, gave him a new perspective on his own troubles and deepened his faith and commitment to struggle for justice.

At the end of this study, Adrian had been working for several years at the neighborhood community center and was a committed father of four children with his fiancée. It was clear in our conversations that his identity and sense of agency were most rooted in his faith and his roles as a father and community member. He spoke at length about how he wanted to raise his children with the values he learned at the Youth Space and how carrying out those values in small, daily ways helped him stay connected to his broader vision and faith.

Cyreta

Cyreta expressed pride about having been born and raised in the neighborhood and said her dream is to be a respected elder in the community. She grew up in a stable home, and her parents had been married for over 25 years. Of her three siblings, a brother and sister lived in the area. Another sister lived outside the state. After attending local schools and after-school programs, she led after-school groups for the same organization. Confident and motivated, Cyreta referenced the women in her family and the presence of her father as possibly shaping her strong sense of self. Below, she described a "sense" and "attitude" that she realized was unique and that informed her passion for mentoring girls and young women:

when I was in high school, like, if you asked any guy that I went to high school with me, . . . [he would say] “you couldn’t get Cyreta’s number. You couldn’t do this with Cyreta. You couldn’t do that with Cyreta, like, nuh-uh Cyreta don’t play that.” . . . I know I’m better than this situation. . . . When I started to realize, like, oh, everybody my age doesn’t have this outlook on life, . . . that where it started from. Like, me working with young people, it started with young ladies. I’ve seen the lack of value or the lack of appreciation they have for themselves, their community, or for each other. . . . I still feel like the self-respect thing for yourself needs to go across the board, and you need to demand respect from society, from your community, from a man or a woman (Cyreta, personal communication, March 2, 2012).

Acting on this sense of purpose and vision for teaching self-respect to girls, Cyreta started a “girls group” at her high school, which sought to connect freshman and senior girls in the hope that the latter could guide the former. It was not until her senior year that she carried her skills, experience, and passion for mentoring girls into the activities at the Youth Space. As a barista at a coffee shop near the church, she had become acquainted with her peers and elders from the Youth Space. Ed learned of her experience and asked her to lead a girls’ group at the space. During the brief period with the group, she developed trusting relationships with her peers and elders that supported her through college and her early career.

While her higher education included some uncertainty with a change of majors and institutions early on, Cyreta expressed assuredness about her academic skills and a sense of clarity about her chosen field of youth work. During her studies, she worked for the after-school program that she had participated in as child. She also became increasingly involved in the professional network where Julie, Adam, and Lance worked. For example, she fulfilled her college internship requirements with the city's Youth Council, working alongside her peers from the Youth Space. Thanks, in part, to Ed's referral, she began working with Go Peace to lead an initiative focused on girls and young women. In talking about her approach to youth and her understanding of their issues, she often referenced research studies as well as her elders' insights and the way they treated her. Despite the fact that she had not participated in the Youth Space as long as several of her peers had, she was processing similar learning, whether experiential or academic, as she completed college and began to work full-time with youth at a community center. As illustrated in Chapter 7, Cyreta saw herself as carrying on the vision and practice of her elders and training the next generation of youth workers.

Julie

Julie, who is now 23, grew up in the neighborhood with her parents, three older brothers, and a younger sister. Her older brothers had been in and out of prison since she was little, and while they were supportive of her and her young sister, they did not have much influence in her life. Julie pointed to her mother and her aunts as role models. She expressed great admiration for her mother, describing her as having "one of those never-give-up spirits" (Julie, personal communication, April 19, 2012). Julie said that her

mother encouraged her and her sister to pursue college from a young age, warning them, “there will be no room, especially [for] young black women, in this world if you don’t pursue your education.” Julie continued, “She would just make it like it wasn’t an option. . . . ‘You have to go. The question is where are you going?’” (Julie, personal communication, April 19, 2012). Julie had several aunts who were teachers or had advanced degrees, one of whom she was in frequent contact with.

When I met Julie, she was about to graduate from high school. After a year of working, she began studying African American studies and social work at a local technical college. Later on, she transferred to a larger public university, where she pursued youth studies. At the close of the present study, she had not yet graduated. She did not discuss her college experience and talked only briefly about junior high and high school, highlighting after-school activities much more than in-school ones. She had participated in an after-school program throughout junior high, prior to her involvement at Community Church. She laughed as she recounted the story of how she came to work in that same program less than a year later. Citing her desire to lead, have responsibility and purpose, and feel needed, along with a strong belief that “[she has] been a part of it for so long that [she has] a really good idea of how it should be done,” she recalled going directly from her eighth-grade graduation to the after-school program to ask for a job. The story illustrates her action-oriented personality, desire to use her own experiences to help others, and tendency to seek out leadership opportunities.

Julie is certain of her capacity to impact young people in a positive way. She expressed a passion for helping youth reflect on their lives and plan for their futures. She

was very clear that this passion was partially driven by her desire to replicate the role her elders had played in her life. During the course of the study, Julie delved deeply into the professional youth development network described above, all while taking college courses. She was training youth in leadership and group facilitation techniques, developing and implementing youth leadership curricula, and helping formerly incarcerated youth reintegrate into the community, among other activities. She hopes to pursue graduate school someday and sees herself as part of new generation of leaders reforming nonprofits that work with youth, making them more responsive to youth needs.

Lance

Lance, 26, was raised in the neighborhood by his mother. Lance recalled he and his sister being on their own a lot while growing up, as his mother worked long hours to support her them. A consistent presence and strong example in his life, Lance said his mother taught him to care for others, to challenge himself, and to work hard in pursuit of his goals. Lance's father lived in the area with his two other sons and one daughter by another relationship. Lance and his sister spent time at their father's house and developed strong relationships with these siblings. While Lance looked up to his two older brothers, he resolved not to follow their examples. One was killed when Lance was in high school, and the other had been incarcerated. "I got a large family, so I done seen a lot," Lance said, referencing his familiarity with gang life and the criminal-justice system (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012). When Lance was 12, his stepfather joined the family and became an important role model, influencing Lance's values and approach to fatherhood.

Lance took pride in his role as a father. Committed to fostering trusting relationships with his daughters despite not living with them and their mother, he worked hard to see or talk to them everyday and “make sure that their mom is provided for . . . that she isn’t struggling too bad” (Lance, personal communication, April 27, 2014). Lance said he drew on his stepfather’s example as he navigated early adulthood and fatherhood and that he was giving his younger brother, a new father at age 18, pointers as well.

Lance spoke with ambivalence about his past schooling and aspirations for college. He said he had “never been, really been, motivated in the classroom” and described himself in high school as “just a kid who was trying to get by” (Lance, personal communication, April 27, 2014). Lance attended a K–8 school that served a part of the city with a high poverty rate and has since been closed. He graduated two years late. He remembered challenging his teachers but appreciated those who “kept it real with [him]” and “didn’t take no BS.” He explained, “When I wanted to be Mr. Big Bad Guy, they shut all that down” (Lance, personal communication, April 27, 2014). He said these teachers shaped his approach with youth and made him want to be a teacher someday.

Lance attended a local for-profit college for less than one semester. He pointed to the stress of personal issues—including an unstable housing situation and the frustrated feeling that one of his teachers did not “understand [his] opinions”—as a factor that led him to drop out. While Lance understood that college was a necessity to reach his career goals, self-doubt and bitterness pervaded his thoughts about higher education. These feelings sometimes inhibited Lance, making him feel self-conscious and hesitated to

speaking up in meetings with college-educated people. He went on to describe how “the drive that’s in [him]” to speak up and communicate “the street side”—his own experiential knowledge—helped overcome this apprehension:

I really think [the drive] come from being a kid that grew up [in the neighborhood], like, you know, you hear so many people coming in and telling us what we are, who, what we do and all that, and excuse me, you’re not here everyday. You don’t know what we do (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

Of all the participants, Lance most readily communicated this sense of agency rooted in anger about how others view his neighborhood. He went on to recount a story about how he and his then-high-school-age peers approached a news crew that was covering a murder scene near the church. He recalled thinking,

“We are doing something positive and great and, you know, productive, and this is what y’all want to show . . . to the world, what our community is about, the death that just happened on [street name]? Excuse me, a block away from that death, we got a community center that is benefitting a handful of kids.” . . . We went over there and asked, you know, spoke to them and got their cards, and we, like, effectively challenged a media company, a large media company and, well, here we are, us as just normal little [neighborhood] kids. It’s like, ‘yo, we need to own what we do,’ you know what I’m saying. This is us, this is my [neighborhood], this is my city. I take care of my people. (Lance, personal communication,

March 8, 2012)

Again, Lance's story is laced with frustration and bitterness about the dominant narrative that the news organization was replaying about his neighborhood. The youth demonstrated pride in their work and a desire for their voices and perspectives to be represented. Lance's summary expressed the broadening scope of his sense of agency—from "owning" his work with Youth Space to claiming and "owning" with pride his neighborhood, city, and "people." These levels of belonging are important parts of his identity as a change agent.

After rebounding from a period of homelessness and joblessness, Lance began working in youth development again. During the duration of this study, he was managing direct programs, serving on committees to change the city's policy on youth issues, and training youth and partner organizations on youth-engagement strategies. In the same way that Lance leveraged his firsthand knowledge to communicate a counternarrative about his neighborhood, he also used this knowledge in his work with youth in after-school programs. As will be described in Chapter 8, he was thoughtful about being a role model. He drew on his own school experiences to relate to and gain the youths' respect, especially that of disengaged boys and young men. Lance understood the uniqueness and value of his experiences of having lived without getting involved in "that life²," in which many of his peers and family members were involved (Lance, personal communication, April 27, 2012).

² Lance and others often used the words "that life" or "the life" to describe a life of gang involvement.

Michelle

Michelle was also born and raised in the neighborhood along with her three older brothers. She lived with her parents, whose 26-year-plus marriage provided continuity and stability, as Michelle pointed out. She spoke of a supportive group of extended family in the area. Her parents “had a problem with” the city’s public schools, which prompted them to seek other options, often following her grandmother’s employment in various schools (Michelle, personal communication, March 15, 2012). Michelle reflected, “I’ve been through like 11 or 12 schools from K-12. . . . It’s crazy. . . . It wasn’t the worst thing in the world. It didn’t give me a lot of ties as far as, you know, friendships and whatever” (Michelle, personal communication, March 15, 2012). Michelle said her mother’s anxiety about increasing violence in community parks along with her insistence that she stay with her siblings or at home “didn’t leave a lot of space and opportunity to be a part of youth groups” (Michelle, personal communication, March 15, 2012).

Michelle developed friendships with school staff when she attended the neighborhood high school for multiple years. She befriended Cyreta and worked as a teacher’s assistant with an after-school girls’ group at a nearby middle school. Her relationship with Cyreta and prior experience with the girls’ group prompted her to co-lead a Youth Space girls’ group during her senior year. Interested in journalism and passionate about writing, Michelle expressed gratitude for the “people along the way,” who “pa[id] attention to [her]” and helped her pursue her interests (Michelle, personal communication, March 15, 2012). She said a teacher and a career adviser at school connected her to an internship and a summer journalism experience at a local private

college.

Michelle said her mom and her “godmom”—the former, a nurse, and the latter, a caseworker for at-risk youth—had likely influenced her desire to serve her community.

Illustrating her passion for storytelling, Michelle talked about problems in her neighborhood as if she were weaving a narrative. She used the words “innocence being taken away” to describe children’s loss of freedom and mobility due to the threat of gun violence in the neighborhood (Michelle, personal communication, March 15, 2012).

Michelle described a girl she mentored in the Youth Space girls’ group as epitomizing the “beautiful struggle” (Michelle, personal communication, March 15, 2012).

While she expressed a passion for working on these issues, she was uncertain about how to do so. During the course of our conversations, she was in the midst of a “push and pull” between her short-term career and school options (Michelle, personal communication, March 15, 2012). She enjoyed college and wanted to pursue writing and, eventually, teach literature; however, she had an intense drive to pay off her student debt. After graduating from high school, she had studied at a local private university while working three part-time jobs and also opening and carrying large balances on several credit cards. She recalled “the stress of it,” and her “kick” to be “financially stable” became her primary focus as she took a full-time job at a local bank and, later, in finance at a nearby company. During that time, she finished her undergraduate degree at two local public institutions. In our initial conversations, Michelle expressed a lot of anxiety about earning money, paying off debt, and working toward owning a home and saving for retirement (goals she had embraced while at the bank). Yet, as she reminisced about the

excitement and creativity of the Youth Space, she seemed to grieve the loss of this significant connection to her community. She shared that Cyreta, her closest friend in the group, had repeatedly urged her to “come back to work with these kids.” Illustrating the way she saw her path diverging from her peers, Michelle said, “I am very excited to see what it will look like for all of them in the future” (Michelle, personal communication, May 15, 2012). Articulating this tension, she said, “I have yet to find that balance. . . . I can be financially stable too, but I can also be, like, in my community . . . doing what I probably should be doing, knowing good and well I don’t really need to be in finance” (Michelle, personal communication, May 15, 2012).

In a more recent conversation, Michelle spoke less dramatically about her options, expressing confidence in a longer-term vision for her career and her role in the community. She was about to take a leave of absence from work to begin a research apprenticeship in women’s studies and African American studies—an experience she hoped would prepare her for graduate school. Michelle also mentioned that she planned to help Cyreta start a group for college-age African American women.

Chapter Five: “It Doesn’t Have to Be the End of This Story”: Learning a Counternarrative of African American History

As the Context chapter illuminated, the young adults in this story were exposed to a radically different way of understanding themselves, their families, and their communities at the Youth Space. In this first Findings chapter, their stories highlight the way learning a courageous African American counternarrative fostered a sense of coalitional agency, or an empowering sense of belonging rooted in African American history and culture (Chávez & Griffin, 2009). The findings discussed here address the first research question regarding the influences that made these young adults believe they should and could effect change in their communities. They also illustrate how the young adults learned about, experienced, and were influenced by the idea that they should effect change and contribute to this counternarrative. The closing discussion highlights the importance of fostering cultural identity development in youth.

“It Doesn’t Have to Be the End of This Story”

The young men and women pointed to a counternarrative they learned at a summer Freedom Schools as foundational to seeing themselves as social-change agents. Learning about the courage, strength, and struggles of their ancestors gave them an empowering sense of belonging and awakened a desire to contribute. For many, this lesson started them on a path of personal discovery and changed the way they viewed themselves in the community, drawing their attention to the richness, wisdom, and power of African American history and the importance—in fact, necessity—of their own contributions to the story. Below, Julie described how learning the counternarrative

affected her and, alongside her subsequent involvement at the Youth Space, changed the way she felt about herself.

Julie: In public schools, like the first time being introduced to my ancestors was through [the narrative of slavery]. And it's like, "Oh, well, uh," . . . and it's like you've got to get that as, like, this is your identity kind of thing But I feel like having those different, like, personalities and different [ethnic] groups in the room at the same time, and that being everyone's first time being introduced to someone's ancestor or anyone there having those identit[ies] be prescribed, it's really important for youth I think to be able to be told differently. . . . By the time I was able to get into [the Youth Space] and get into, you know, being a part of other organizations that said differently [or provided a counternarrative] and it just opened some, a different door. Like, it doesn't have to be that way. It doesn't have to be my identity. It doesn't have to be the end of this story. . . .

Beth: Because that's how a school wants to treat it, and the history books want to close the chapter.

Julie: Yeah, so if I would have never been involved in that level and kind of tried to expand that knowledge. Because once you go to [the Youth Space], like, you learn so much more. Like, you learn so much more about your ancestors and your history and your community and the people around you, that, like, you can't stop there. . . . I've got to learn more, and

I have to be able to understand more and you know, be able to contribute to this history and do things differently. So . . . it's always been one thing after another or, you know, coming into [the Youth Space], learning and being around other youth who kind of had similar experiences [of learning the narrative of slavery in school], where, like, "oh, that's the first time I was introduced to my ancestors as well." . . . [The narrative learned in school] . . . really portrayed our community as passive and as docile and as cowardly almost . . . when you hear about like Harriet [Tubman] talking, for example, it's something that [public school curricula]. . . going to talk about the most but [public school curricula] don't talk about the courage in that. . . . [she discusses the counternarrative that the huge number of escaped slaves dealt a blow to the economy and that there was not, as commonly asserted in the dominant narrative, a "moral [per]suasion to remove slavery from our Constitution"]. . . . But as a young person being taught that, it was like, "Okay, well that makes sense that slave owners would stop owning slaves if people would run away all the time." And it was like, it just kind of paints it in your head As a young person, I felt really low and I won't say that it's just about [the dominant narrative of slavery], but I mean thinking about my family and our situation and our finances and just household wasn't the ideal household and it wasn't the ideal, like, upbringing that I would see you know, in my friends or people that I knew or other like people around me.

It just didn't seem the same. I kind of always felt like smaller than the other people around me and being able to come around Ed and being at [the Youth Space], like, it changed that a lot. I didn't really feel, I didn't feel as important, you know, around, until you could actually have someone say to you like what you bring and your contribution to this is an asset and it's needed. . . . It's a different feeling as a young person, to have someone say, like, yeah, that's necessary and it's important for this.

(Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2013)

Becoming Aware of and Claiming Power

What Julie found and was attracted to in the counternarrative was her ancestors' power, meaning their strength and courage along with the impact they had through individual and collective resistance. This story of a powerful people quickly replaced a characterization of her ancestors as "passive and as docile and as cowardly almost" that Julie had learned in school. Where a void had once existed—that is, an absence of power, courage, hope, even humanity, as well as ancestors she did not understand—Julie learned "so much more" in the counternarrative. It made more sense to her and honored the humanity of African Americans. She could identify with this narrative and build from it. It opened "a different door," inciting a passionate and urgent desire to learn more and become a co-author and agent of change.

As she recounted this story, Julie quickly wove herself into the narrative, embodying her ancestors' courage and hope and speaking emphatically about contributing to the counternarrative, saying "I've got to learn more and I have to be able

to understand more and you know, be able to contribute to this history and do things differently.” Almost seamlessly, Julie drew connections from her ancestors to her community and “the people around [her]” as sites of power and sources of learning that would guide her actions.

A Context for Learning “So Much More”

I heard the exact phrase, “you learn so much more,” from Julie, Michelle, and Cyreta, as they described learning the counternarrative at the Youth Space. Altogether, this “so much more” highlighted the personal relevance of this lesson and how they learned it. They encountered the counternarrative alongside elders and peers where they felt safe, understood, free from judgment, and able to grapple with its complexity. The content and process of their learning honored these youths’ struggles and strengths, helped them to recognize and embrace their own power to effect change, and framed their community and their interactions with others as sites of power.

In her earlier reflection, Julie compared her education in school, Freedom School, and the Youth Space, highlighting the contexts that facilitated or inhibited her learning. Julie described the process of learning about her ancestors and slavery in school, alongside students of other ethnic groups, as having her and her ancestors’ identity “prescribed,” a word that suggests that she felt like a powerless recipient of the characterization and the narrative. The typical power dynamics of the classroom where students are receivers of knowledge, combined with the presence of students of different ethnicities and lived experiences, who presumably accepted this dominant narrative, were sufficient to mute any questions or resistance that Julie felt inclined to voice. However, in

the Youth Space, where discussion and informed debate were encouraged, Julie said “learning and being around other youth who kind of had similar experiences” was an asset, which supported her personal growth. Relating to others without the fear of having assumptions “prescribe” her identity, finding words to articulate shared experiences and struggles, and having the space and voice to question and probe, helped her learn “so much more” and find herself in the counternarrative.

Finding “A Place to Hang [Their] Stor[ies]”

Learning an empowering African American counternarrative shaped the way the young adults saw themselves, lending a greater sense of clarity about and connectedness to their past experiences and visions of their futures. For example, Julie described the shift from “fe[eling] really low” and “smaller than” people around her to hearing from her elders and recognizing her skills and contributions as “needed,” “important,” and “an asset.” The impetus behind this perspective change was likely a complex combination of experiences, but Julie pointed to 1) learning a more empowering narrative of her ancestors and 2) having her identity and contributions affirmed by Ed, other elders, and her peers at the Youth Space. Julie’s learning and tangible actions at the Youth Space became a way for her to better understand and contribute to the counternarrative of African American struggle, her community, and herself.

Adam shared a story that illustrates how the counternarrative helped him understand and reframe a past experience of struggle. As a Freedom School participant, he encountered the autobiography of Assata Shakur. He described reading the book and having group discussions in which facilitators helped them draw connections between the

book and their own lives and their community as “life-changing” (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012). Sharing how he had been curious about the Black Panthers before then and soon realized that Assata Shakur was related to the rapper Tupac Shakur, Adam described the convergence of his intellectual and personal interest in history and his passion for music as “all the sparks, stuff was flyin’” (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012). Below, his words elucidate these initial “sparks” as Shakur’s story resonated with him:

it was so good to be able to read her story, um, and to see what she went through in her, her change as a person from, um, just a regular person. She used to, like, go to stores and steal stuff, [doing] just regular kid stuff, just to see her change and see how the, how society changed her into being more militant-minded, I think was really important for me. Uh, uh, I never really questioned race. I knew I had my racial identity. . . . I get my, you know, my conscience from my mom. She’s very conscious. . . . She’s more passionate about that stuff, and so it was always in my head, but, um, bein’ able to learn for it by myself and put everything I was experiencing into context along with the book, um, was real tight. (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012)

Assata Shakur’s story was relevant to many parts of Adam’s life. The group discussions around the book, especially related to race, tapped into ideas his mother had exposed him to, but also helped him find commonalities with his own experiences that he had not considered before. Adam was especially struck by the normalcy of Shakur’s childhood

and with her intellectual journey of becoming more conscious of race and racism in society. When I later asked Adam to tell me more about the experiences that were put “into context along with the book,” he talked about switching from mainstream to International Baccalaureate classes in middle school and the vast difference “put [him] on notice” about racial disparities in the school system and their consequences (Adam, personal communication, February 12, 2014). The readings and discussions in that summer’s Freedom School not only illuminated his experience, it raised his critical race consciousness and gave this intellectually capable youth, who felt disengaged in school, encouragement, an outlet for his intellectual interests, and an avenue for personal growth. Like Julie, Adam also emphasized the way learning alongside his friends, or “see[ing] [his] peers doin’ somethin’ that like [he] was startin’ to get passion for” was important for him (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012).

As Ed read part of Julie’s story, above, he reiterated his belief in the importance of helping youth understand their own cultural identity and celebrating that identity among peers. Pointing to Julie’s example, he related a beautiful interpretation that also applies to Adam’s story:

[You] don’t know the truth of something until you know the history of it, the derivative.³ Where did it come from? And once you understand where it came from, then you can understand the truth of it and the relevance of something. . . . I’m telling my own story. I’m finding my own story. . . . It gave me a place to hang my story with. Before my story’s just out here.

³ Ed cited Professor M. El Kati, a scholar, activist, and community elder, whose thinking greatly influenced Ed as well as many young adults in this study.

Now all I could find are some other common elements in humanity that [I] can identify with my story. (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

Ed's synopsis elaborated on what these young adults meant when they said they learned "so much more" about African American history in the Youth Space and at Freedom School. Embracing an empowering historical and cultural narrative stressed their own "truth" and their own "relevance" in the world, giving them "a place to hang [their] story" (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014).

Discussion

The findings in this chapter draw out aspects of the "so much more" that the young adults said they had learned at Freedom School and had not experienced in public school. Altogether, their learning was much more culturally and socially relevant. Julie discovered a courageous narrative that came to life, reeled her in, and made her feel needed and a necessary contributor. What was once an isolated, frustrating experience for Adam began to make sense when it resonated with another story of struggle and resistance. The young adults' stories illustrate their access to "critical social capital" (Ginwright, 2007, p. 404) through historical and cultural narratives and discussions that reframe their personal struggles as political issues (Ginwright, 2007; O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003).

Furthermore, this identity-shaping, transformative learning reaffirms the power of culturally relevant pedagogy for engaging youth (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1992). "A pedagogy of opposition that recognizes and celebrates African-American culture"

(Ladson-Billings, 1992), culturally relevant pedagogy has much in common with the Freedom Schools' mission, curricula, and approach. With a focus on collective empowerment, the teachings seek to guide students "to examine critically the society in which they live and to work for social change" (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 314; 1995). It clearly aligns with the approaches the young adults experienced both in the Freedom Schools and at the Youth Space. As previously discussed, Ed embraced the Freedom Schools' "model of affirmation, . . . model of celebration, . . . [and] model of encouragement and direction" (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014) year-round and deliberately created opportunities for youth to get involved with community issues. Subsequent chapters examine the ways that culturally relevant pedagogy at the Youth Space moved the youth beyond critical examinations of issues to constant considerations of how to effect change.

Both of the young adults' reflections above point to the importance of learning alongside peers who were embracing new ideas, drawing connections to their lives, and thinking of ways to effect change (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003; Ginwright, 2007). For Julie, hearing that her peers had similar experiences of learning about their ancestors and slavery was reassuring and fostered interpersonal connections with her peers. Adam also highlighted the close relationships that developed during this particular summer. In fact, both times that I asked him how his reading of Shakur's autobiography affected him, he noted the power of being introduced to these new ideas alongside his peers. Adam, Julie, Adrian, and Lance all said that their summer experiences cemented their relationships with one another and with others who were involved. Embracing the counternarrative,

having critical group discussions, and taking on youth-inspired projects created a shared experience and a group identity, which the youth integrated into their own self-concept (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Tatum, 1997; O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). The young adults continued to use these foundational peer relationships to ground them in the common understandings and commitments that formed within the group. Furthermore, exploring their cultural and racial identities heightened some of the young peoples' understanding of how race impacted their lives. As Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) explains, "racial grouping is common and part of a developmental process in response to racism. . . . Joining with one's peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy" (p. 62). The next chapter employs the young adults' words to describe two core "commitments in action" that they referenced as shaping their sense of agency for social change.

Chapter Six: Commitments in Action

In describing the ideas that guide their decisions and in articulating the values that connect them to the counternarrative, detailed in the previous chapter, and to one another, the young adults referenced two broad commitments. The first is to honor the humanity of others. The second is to serve others and struggle for justice. The phrase “commitments in action” reflects the way the commitments guide how the young adults enact agency in their lives and provide ways to contribute to the counternarrative in big ways (i.e., through career choices) and small ways (i.e., in conversations that help others see themselves as part of a worthwhile struggle). This chapter’s discussion of the commitments primarily addresses the first research question regarding the influences that made the young adults believe they should and could effect change. The commitments constitute an empathetic, servant-minded worldview that is contrary to the dominant culture of individualism in American society. The commitments in action resonate with Christian teachings, illustrating the role of faith in the African American freedom struggle, especially for the young adults who explicitly expressed this connection to their faith.

In trying to understand what fostered their sense of agency, I asked the young adults to describe when they felt as if they had “made a difference” and what they “took away” from these experiences. I inquired about how they learned of various opportunities to effect change in their community, why they stayed involved, and about their motivations for pursuing this work. I expected to hear about personal goals, professional connections, and how they were strategically navigating a rich network around them.

Instead, they repeatedly pointed to these two principles as guiding their actions and the ways in which they contributed to the counternarrative and, more broadly, to the world. As Julie stated in the previous chapter, “I’ve got to learn more, and I have to be able to understand more and, you know, be able to contribute to this history” (Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2013). The urgency in her statement reflects the way she understood the value and necessity of her contributions. Learning this counternarrative fostered a sense of being a different person. How does one live out this goal as someone different? The sections in this chapter draw on the young adults’ words to define these commitments in action and to begin to illustrate their influence in these young men and women’s lives.

Honoring Humanity

I was so grateful to Adrian for explicitly using the word “humanity” in his conversations with me. This idea helped me recognize the strand of thought in other participants’ stories. I draw on Adrian’s stories below to explain the commitment to honor humanity. Adrian remembered the Freedom Schools’ Underground Railroad simulations as especially visceral and said they “gave [him] grounds for, like, who [he is] as a person, like, as an African American, as a race, and gave [him] another sense of humanity.” He elaborated on this point with an example:

I’m not going to take somebody’s life just because you call me the n-word. I respect your life. You may have done me wrong. I respect your life, . . . and the crazy part is it’s not two-way. . . . It’s me trying to be the person I want to be. It’s not about you; it’s about me. And forgiveness, it’s not for

the other person. It's for you. (Adrian, personal communication, May 19, 2013)

In learning the counternarrative, Adrian recognized a “sense of humanity” that challenged and inspired him to align his actions and values. Adrian, a thoughtful and spiritual young man, interpreted his learning in terms of the value of respecting all people. In enacting this commitment, he chose to respect himself and others, even in the face of injustice. By choosing to honor humanity, Adrian was “able to be the person [he] want[ed] to be.” Adrian highlighted the power of practicing forgiveness, focusing on his personal and spiritual growth, rather than on actions of others. Marveling at the fact that “it’s not two-way,” Adrian pointed to how his sense of self and his commitments remained strong, regardless of how others viewed and treated him.

Root Issues: Finding Humanity in The Issues

Another one of Adrian’s stories demonstrates more concretely what the commitment to honor humanity looked like. Below, he shared how discussions at the Youth Space introduced him to the idea of “root issues,” which taught him to recognize and appreciate others’ humanity:

Adrian: “. . . we talk about youth violence and talk about that, but we never talk about the root issues. That’s [his initial involvement at the Youth Space] one time I ever heard them words, “root issues.” And I’m like, OK, then don’t shoot these people. People shoot each other, but why? Are they just crazy, or is that really why they’re doing it?

Beth: Just “bad” people?

Adrian: Right, they're just "bad," you know. So you start looking at family structures. You start looking at their financials, financial why they're doing it, though, looking at vendettas, start looking at other reasons why people would go to that extreme. And you start realizing that you stop demonizing so much, start looking at them like human beings. So, that's one thing that [Ed] opened my eyes up to a lot. OK, they're still human beings. But they made a horrible choice about doing something, but they're still many things. You need to just feel respect about human beings and hold them accountable for their actions. (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012)

Adrian demonstrated the practice of breaking through an issue's label (e.g., youth violence) and delving into the complex factors that make up the issue. He recognized the tendency to "demonize" others but highlighted the importance trying to understand people and their situations. Adrian said this way of thinking changed the way he saw his community and his role in it. By using empathy, he was able to better understand the multiple factors that contribute to youth violence and honor the humanity of the people participating in it.

Discussing "root issues" and seeking to understand peoples' circumstances also raised Adrian's consciousness of the systems and structures in society that contributed to "why people would go to that extreme." By deconstructing the dominant narrative and understanding "root issues," the youths developed critical consciousness about the problems that directly affected them. At the same time, they embraced the idea that they

should contribute to a broader African American struggle. Discussing “root issues” revealed aspects of their own lived experiences—including youth violence and limited economic opportunities—where collective struggle was needed and worthwhile.

Honoring Humanity Means Recognizing the Precariousness of the Journey

Honoring others’ humanity, rather than demonizing them, also recognized and affirmed the closeness of these young men’s and women’s lives with those of the people who had made “bad” choices and had gotten caught up in gangs, alcohol, or drugs. Some who had “made a horrible choice” (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012) were friends, siblings, and cousins and, as the young adults pointed out, could easily have been them as well. For example, Julie said, “[she] was not one of those kids that would be ‘on the right track’ like, I mean, I was barely making it school three times a week, if anything at all” (Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2013). Another young adult, Lance, recalled growing up with his brothers’ examples and feeling uncertain about his choices. His story broke down the false distinction between “positive” and “negative” paths and “good” and “bad” people. In it, he began talking about a brother who was killed by gun violence.

Like, [my brother] did his dirt; he wasn't, like, a horrible person. You know, like, he took care of his kids and loved his son and all that, but some of the other choices that he made weren't the greatest for the community. And so, for me, to be this positive figure working, you know, working right over here at [the Youth Space] and here I got my brother right around the corner doing his dirt, it was like kind of funny 'cause it was, like, like,

“how did you end up going the path you did and here was your brother?”
And then I had another brother who I got, who recently just got out of jail,
which I pray, I thank God for, 'cause he's doing straight and, you know,
got a job and all that stuff, but, like, “how did you end up taking this
pathway?” And like, you know, I had two examples, two perfectly good
examples, two people I looked up to, that I wanted to hang out with, be
around and be like and all that stuff. And he made one choice, and that's
what happened. He made another choice, and that's what happened. Well,
I know I don't want to make either one of these choices. So let me see what
happens if I do this, you know. And that's the same ambition that they had
with their hustle; I took with the youth work that I was doing. (Lance,
personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Lance certainly did not miss the painful irony that he and his brother were working in opposite directions in the community. But he started by talking about a common value, the importance of being a good father, which Lance prioritized with his own young children. As Lance replayed a hypothetical conversation, he was pondering profound, existential questions. Responding in a way that did not honor his brothers' humanity would minimize all they had in common and would not fully respect the pain, struggle, and uncertainty of Lance's own experience. Lance presented his choosing a positive path and getting involved in youth work as an uncertain guess (“let me see what happens if”), rather than as a purposeful, carefully weighed decision.

The people around him also influenced Lance's journey. Not wanting to replicate

his brothers' actions and their consequences, he stayed in contact with his elders and peers at the Youth Space, who affirmed his identity as an African American man and a community change agent. At the end of his story, Lance again highlighted what he shared with his brothers—ambition—even though each brother enacted that ambition differently. Honoring others' humanity respected the personal connections in these young peoples' lives, recognized the precariousness of their own journeys, and allowed them to embrace their full selves with their struggles and strengths.

Sense of Responsibility to Serve Others and to Struggle for Justice

These young adults demonstrated an outward focus, concern for others, emphasis on the connections between themselves and others, and awareness of the potential consequences of their actions on others. The commitment to serve others and struggle for justice is deeply tied to the counternarrative about African Americans and the commitment to honor humanity. As Julie's story in the previous chapter illustrated, part of finding oneself in the counternarrative was embracing one's responsibility to contribute to the generational struggle for justice. The human connectedness inherent in the first commitment valued and encouraged understanding others, serving them, and struggling for the greater good. A shared sense of coalitional agency was forming through this emphasis on connectedness and the youths' cultural identity development. The young adults' stories in this section reveal how their commitment to serve others shaped the way they see themselves in the world.

Julie pointed to the importance of the Freedom Schools teachings that “there's more to this than you” (Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2013). She later

explained, “Without [the Youth Space], we would be engaging with our families and our communities differently. In [the Youth Space], they asked me to think about my role with peers who weren’t in the room, with family, in the community. You had the feeling you were part of something else. You are building on something” (field notes, June 1, 2013). An important part of assuming the responsibility to serve others and struggle for justice was to accept their embeddedness in numerous relationships and spheres of their lives.

Describing himself as “one of those kids” who preferred to play rather than sit still and listen, Lance described how “[his elders] was able to catch [the youth]” during one Freedom School summer. He related the experience as an “ah-ha moment” that changed the way he viewed himself and how he acted in his neighborhood:

Ooh, OK, this is important. . . . I should be caring about what’s going on in my community. . . . Before I got involved with [the Youth Space] and all of that, literally, it was just family, that’s all I was concerned about. . . . If I seen something being done wrong to somebody, you know, I’m not gonna lie, like, as kid, you know, I just keep on moving, you know. I’m not gonna get myself involved ’cause it had nothing to do with me. But it was, like, after that summer, you know, you see certain things and were, like, you know, I might see two little kids outside of their house fighting each other. Well, after being involved in Freedom School and talking about how we should love our brother and protect our sisters, “no man, you gotta cut that out, you know, cut that choice,” you know, and they may look at me crazy, like, “who are you to be saying this?” But it’s just the simple fact

that I look at it, like, there was somebody who told me the same thing. . . . They stopped and said something [to me]. It was like, "OK, you actually got me to think about what I'm doing right now, like, you makin' me realize that what I'm doing may not be, like, perceived as the right thing." . . . It's become key, like, as far as, like, with working with like the kids and all of that, like, 'cause of Freedom School. I love the way that I work with kids 'cause of Freedom School. (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Lance's shift from a mentality of minding his own business to stepping up and speaking up seemed to stem from both the Freedom School teachings ("love our brother and protect our sisters") and the way people in his life made him think about how others perceived his actions and the example he set. He pointed to how viewing himself as a role model and appreciating the power and importance of that role has enriched his work with youth. Lance articulated two interconnected strands of coalitional agency that influenced the way he saw himself and his actions. One was the ongoing African American counternarrative of brothers and sisters struggling together. Discussing the second strand of coalitional agency, Lance noted his elders having "said something" as part of his motivation for speaking up. He acknowledged his elders' impact on his thinking and indicated the hope and pride he felt about similarly impacting the youth he encountered.

Connecting with elders and professionals from the neighborhood and the broader metropolitan area, who also valued serving others and framed work in the community as a responsibility, further reinforced the commitment to serve others. Julie recalled

activities surrounding a large conference that featured a Noble Laureate visiting the neighborhood, organized by a group of youth, African American elders from throughout metropolitan area, and youth-development professionals. During one planning meeting, Julie described how the “message” that she was “responsible to be a neighbor/community member” sunk in when she saw others volunteering their insights and support:

I became more engaged and became more attached to the project because [of] how people around the table were sharing different stories about the needs of the community. And they felt that something this big coming to the community would definitely bring it up and encourage people. Not even just to be peaceful but to be a neighbor or to be a community member. I think the biggest part for me was that I've lived in this community my whole life, and I've never really looked at it that way. . . . It had never dawned on me that I have a responsibility to be a neighbor to people. To not take myself out of the situation but to be a part of it, verses me from the top down, me helping people as well as I live here so of course they need the help and so do I. . . . So that was a real eye-opener for me to be in the room with so many different people who kind of have that lens . . . but when you're a young person and you're invited to come and share your opinion, . . . you just feel like a superhero 'cause you're helping. But what the community made very clear to me was that I'm no more of a hero than anyone else that's suffering from this or that's dealing with these problems just because I'm willing to help. That just means that there needs to be

more people that feel responsible, not feel. . . . I don't even know what other word to describe that, but there should be more people that feel obligated to do this. (Julie, personal communication, April 18, 2012)

Julie had been involved with speaking out in the community and doing mentorship and outreach through the Youth Space for nearly two years when she had this powerful revelation. What was it about this particular experience that was different? Julie pointed to the community elders' "lens"—a way of seeing oneself as responsible to be a neighbor or community member. Julie saw the elders' living this idea out as they volunteered their time to the intensive planning process. Understanding their "lens" prompted a shift in Julie's thinking from seeing work in her neighborhood as a choice, even a profession ("from the top down") to a responsibility. In stating that she learned "to not take [her]self out of the situation but to be a part of it," she framed working in her community as something she should do because "[she] live[s] here," rather than a choice made out of personal or professional interest.

Having experienced the model of affirming and celebrating youths' contributions and embraced the idea that her part was needed, Julie enjoyed feeling like "a superhero 'cause you're helping." For her, adopting the community elders' viewpoint shifted the need for celebration and superhero status to her work being a responsibility, a given, and an expectation. Quite typical of Julie's personality, she assumed the new perspective with ardor as she began to articulate her vision for spreading this worldview so that more people "feel responsible" to their communities.

Julie's reflection illustrates her sense of connectedness to a broad network of

community elders and the mutual sense of coalitional agency that defined their lens of human connectedness, responsibility, and commitment to social justice. This form of coalitional agency also had important concrete implications. Julie, Adam, Lance, and Adrian's involvement in planning this event marked the beginning of their involvement with Go Peace, which later branched out to numerous professional opportunities for Julie, Lance, Adam, and Cyreta.⁴

Discussion

The main themes in this chapter describe the young adults' commitments in action by weaving together their recollections of "eye-opening" experiences or powerful shifts in their understanding of themselves in the world that have moral dimensions (Hart & Fegely, 1995; Yates & Youniss, 1996). In describing the contexts around their transformative learning, the young adults shed light onto the group norms, relationships, and experiences that helped them embrace the commitments in action. For example, the norm of discussing "root issues" simultaneously broke down complex problems into understandable parts and brought them closer to the youths' lived experiences (encouraging an empathic response that recognized a common humanity). The young adults expressed a sense of "building on something," that is, a sense of connectedness, a "sense of common struggle" (Ginwright, 2007, p. 412), and coalitional agency 1) across generations (as illustrated in Lance's story about speaking up because somebody stopped

⁴ Cyreta was not yet involved with the Youth Space during the planning of this 2008 event. She tapped into this professional network several years later while she pursued her degree.

him and made him think) and 2) around ideas, moral commitments, and visions for justice.

The common thread of building on an existing foundation is the ambition to make a difference, to strive for a goal bigger than oneself, and to join the struggle. This thread echoes the “familiarity with struggle” concept that, in O’Connor’s (1997) research, set the “resilient six” apart from their peers in terms of their high levels of critical consciousness, aspirations, and commensurate academic achievements. O’Connor suggested that the students’ were influenced by their “embeddedness in a cultural context” and their being “privy to social behavior and discursive practices which not only expressed the need for struggle but also expressed its potential to produce desirable change” (p. 605). Arising from the counternarrative of African American struggle, the commitments to honor humanity and to serve others and struggle for justice help explain the young adults embeddedness—their consistent observation of and participation in “social behavior and discursive practices” that framed struggle as worthwhile. The practice of discussing “root issues” is among the clearest examples of a discursive practice. Julie’s observation of her community elders’ “lens” constitutes her being “privy to social behavior” that embraced collective struggle as an avenue to effect change. As discussed in the previous chapter, the youth learned this counternarrative and found affirmation that they had important contributions to make to the collective struggle. The culture of the Youth Space and the elders’ discursive practices, discussed in detail in the next chapter, facilitated iterative connections between the young people and the broader

narrative of struggle and blurred “boundar[ies] between personal and political dimensions of daily life” (Ginwright, 2007, p. 414).

This chapter, especially, provides evidence of the development of purpose and moral commitments in youth and young adulthood. As previously mentioned, the focus of the investigation changed in response to the young adults repeatedly pointing to their commitments in action as guiding how they were influenced by their relationships and experiences and as informing how they navigated young adulthood. While individual interest and strategic career goals played a role, the young men and women emphasized a broader commitment to serve others and struggle for social justice, reflecting a strong moral directedness (i.e., Adrian: “it’s me trying to be the person I want to be. It’s not about you; it’s about me” [personal communication, May 19, 2013]).

Koshy and Mennon Mariano (2011) define purpose as “an organizing principle, providing young people with a coherent vision of their future that connects in meaningful ways to their present life” (p. 13). Research on purpose highlights the “beyond-the-self quality of purpose [that] can help adolescents think beyond personal gains and [that can] help promote moral actions for the sake of others” (Koshy & Mennon Mariano, 2011, p. 14). The way the young adults’ commitments in action constituted “organizing principles” in their lives signals the relevance of purpose. Furthermore, the youth adults’ inclination to discuss moral dimensions of their actions, choices, and self-concept reflects the integration of moral commitments into their overall identities (Hart & Fegely, 1995; Yates & Youniss, 1996). In fact, the two basic elements of moral identity identified by Youniss and Yates (1999) closely resemble this study’s commitments in action—“the

understanding that human beings share a common humanity...[and] the extension of relationships of respect to all of society” (p. 369-370). Uniquely, the young adults in this study embraced their moral commitments while processing their learning about a history of injustices based in a lack of respect for humanity.

The present study’s findings offer insights into the intersections of moral commitments and identity development and as well as the “cultural, socioeconomic, or historical-cohort differences that might affect the kinds of purposes that young people resonate to” (p. 126), which youth purpose researchers assert is needed (Damon, Menon, and Bronk, 2003). The previous chapter about Freedom Schools as a launching point for the young adults’ identity formation around an African American counternarrative offers a partial response to the question. In addition, the next chapter’s findings regarding relationships and group expectations explore the concrete practices that facilitated the youths’ integration of moral commitments into their identities and visions of the future (Koshy & Mennon Mariano, 2011; Hart & Fegely, 1995; Yates & Youniss, 1996).

Chapter Seven: Relationships and Experiences that Fostered Agency for Change

The previous chapter explored the young adults' moral commitments, but how did they come to practice and fulfill them in daily life? Who and what inspired and supported this drive to act for social change? This third Findings chapter focuses on the relationships and experiences that the young men and women said fostered their sense of agency and provided opportunities to live out their commitments in action within the group and in the neighborhood. The first section, "Trusting Relationships with Elders," conveys how the young adults experienced instrumental support and guidance as well as holistic personal affirmation in their relationships with Ed, Aaron, and Amy. The second section describes the challenging expectations that elders encouraged at the Youth Space and how those expectations fostered the youths' engagement. The third section focuses on the way youth often casually entered and, in the cases of the study participants, became engaged at the Youth Space. Having leadership opportunities and being exposed to a rich network of opportunities in their neighborhood and beyond enabled the young adults to enact their agency for change and continue doing community and social-justice work. The fourth section features Ed's reflection as to how the group became an "accountability community" that supported the young adults in living out the commitments in action. The fifth section shares the young adults' thoughts on a time they felt like they made a difference as they acted together in their neighborhood. The final section discusses salient themes from the chapter.

In addition to detailing shared experiences of enacting their agency, this third Findings chapter clarifies how the young adults experienced and came to embrace these

commitments in action through their relationships with their elders and one another. The previous two chapters showed how the counternarrative and commitments in action instilled the idea that young adults should affect change in their community. Further fleshing out the first research question, this chapter illustrates how this “should” gravitated toward a sense that these young adults could make a difference.

Trusting Relationships with Elders

As the young adults explained, their elders were available to help them with projects or talk with them about personal issues. This openness sent a powerful message that built trust and also made the youth feel heard and supported. Amy, an elder and former staff member, remembered the balance between activities and casual, one-on-one time for youth to talk with the adults: “You showed up and Mama Tania was probably cooking, and you could talk to her in the kitchen. We were there if you got out of school early. There was enough going on in the building to be involved, but there was always time to talk” (Amy, field notes, February 12, 2012). This availability to talk was an important foundation for prioritizing relationships with youth.

Cyreta talked about how the responsibility of leading the girls’ group could have been overwhelming but that she felt more confident knowing that her elders trusted her and were there to support her.

[Aaron] would tell us, “If you guys need me, I’m downstairs. If you need me to go to the store, I’ll go to the store.” He was there, and that’s something I always got from Sister Amy and Brother Aaron, and Mr. Ed, is that even though they were looked at as elders or as big brothers and

big sisters to us, they were always there to serve. Like, that's something that I feel, like, we all, when I say "we all," I mean Michelle, Julie, Lance, Adam, we all carry that with us that we're here to serve young people.

(Cyreta, personal communication, March 2, 2012)

Cyreta's experienced her elders being "there to serve," whether talking through ideas or picking up supplies. For the elders, being "there to serve" meant helping the youth realize their goals within and beyond the Youth Space. They helped youth think through their ideas, asking pointed questions. At a group gathering, Michelle and Julie laughed as they recalled times that they excitedly shared a project idea with Ed. As he calmly asked about its goal or purpose, they exclaimed, "We passioned it!" (Michelle, field notes, February 12 2012). Paraphrasing his words, the young women said that Ed would remind them, "passion only goes so far. You need to have a bigger purpose or goal to it all" (field notes, February 12, 2012). The elders also checked in with the youth about their activities with other organizations and gave them rides so they could be involved. These day-to-day interactions and norms at the Youth Space communicated a broader, empowering message. In fact, as Cyreta pointed out above, the all-encompassing approach of serving youth shaped the way she and her peers now view their roles in working with youth.

At a deeper level than the daily projects and activities, elders at the Youth Space fostered holistic relationships with youth and modeled what honoring humanity and serving others looked like. They demonstrated respect for the young people as full human beings, showing them that they were valued and accepted fully, including their mistakes or struggles. Lance laughed as he remembered his elders "dealing with" him and his

peers:

I feel like they put their all into us. I mean, Ed, oh man, old man broke his back when it came to us. I mean, late nights, the early mornings, the feedin', the personal issues that we would—like, Ed dealt with us in our all entirety. Our ups, our downs, our goods, our bads, it's, like, Ed just, he dealt with it. (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

The young men and women marveled at the patience, persistence, and hope that Ed, Aaron, and Amy demonstrated, as they supported youth in all dimensions of their lives. For, as Lance's story in Chapter 6 illustrated, the youths' journeys were uncertain and precarious. The young adults indicated the importance of having a place where they felt fully accepted with all of their strengths and weaknesses and where they could share successes and work through their struggles. Adrian's story provided a concrete example of how Ed supported him through significant challenges while helping him engage in meaningful activities. Below, Adrian described how Ed understood his economic problems without asking directly and worked to meet some of Adrian's financial needs in order to keep him involved. Adrian remembered,

Financially, I was in a situation. Like, I couldn't afford clothes. I was in a situation, like, I'm just on the street doin' nothin'. Though, so, like, [Ed] covered so many bases and stuff like [Ed:] "yeah I've got a youth program and you want to get involved in it?" . . . He knew what my needs was and kind of carried the program around my needs. Like, he didn't have to pay me, but he knew that I needed shoes and clothes for school.

Therefore, he made it [the program], therefore, I could get paid. And so, once I got involved it kind of was something else, something else, something else. . . . If you showed him something, he would take it. . . . [A stipend] made you come the first couple extra times, but after you realized you took ownership of it, you kind of just want to go [to the Youth Space] anyway. But he dealt with people on levels of, like, not just the immediate need . . . but also he took your passion and made it to something that can be molded. It's really hard to explain it. I don't know how to really explain it. (Adrian, personal communication, May 19, 2013)

Adrian pointed out the “many bases” that participating at the Youth Space covered. Two stand out especially: it provided for his financial needs and gave him a safe place to go when he would have otherwise been in the streets. Adrian later explained that he and Ed did not often talk explicitly about Adrian’s financial hardship. Instead, Ed would express a need for Adrian’s help on a project and offer to pay a modest stipend for his work. By foregrounding his own necessities and offering payment, Ed helped address Adrian’s financial problems while not directly discussing the topic, thus showing empathy and respect for Adrian. Ed modeled what honoring humanity looked like. Adrian described how the concrete financial motivation evolved into him taking ownership of the project and developing a passion that motivated his continued involvement. Adrian was one of Ed’s apprentices for video projects and learned how to use a digital video camera, sound equipment, and editing software. As Adrian learned more, Ed affirmed Adrian’s contributions and highlighted the necessity of those skills in

subsequent projects. Feeling affirmed about his contributions to projects and encouraged about his financial struggles, Adrian could more fully engage at the Youth Space and wanted to do his best for himself and for Ed.

The elders' acceptance and affirmation of the youth reinforced the latter's self-confidence. Lance was also involved in the digital video company, working on various projects, often related to telling the community's history or documenting public and private events. This work brought the youth into situations they had not yet experienced, sometimes with groups of mostly white adult professionals across the metropolitan area. Lance remembered these situations and his self-confidence despite the assumptions he felt the people in the room had about him. Lance recalled,

You got Ed coming in with group of 10 to 15 black kids from the [neighborhood] you know, three of, four out of five of them have on do-rags [Lance and Adam laugh]. . . . You thinking, like, "OK, what does this group really have to offer?" You know, and then we set up, and they're like "oh, OK, looks like they know what they're doing." And then they see us working, they see us communicating, and then they see the end product. And then they're like, "Really, this group from Community Church created this?" Like, "yes, this is what we do." Like, we still ourselves, we didn't lose ourselves within it, and that was the one thing that I appreciate Ed [for], like, to this day. I still appreciate him, like, letting us be ourselves within everything that we did. He didn't want us to change ourselves and be all extra uptight, like this youth group. . . . I don't think

Ed ever like pulled, used another youth group as an example. . . . [Adam nods in agreement] . . . [Lance, speaking as Ed:] “You know, this is how they do it over at [nearby suburb]. . . . No, you guys are your own thing. I’m gonna give you guys the tools and hopefully you all know how to, you got to take ’em and you gotta utilize them to ya’ll’s full advantage.”

(Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Lance’s story explores how he experienced situations that brought to the surface his double consciousness (Du Bois, 2007). He was fully aware of the way that he, as a young black man, was likely viewed by others. He came to see his videography skills and the products he and his peers created as sources of pride and concrete means to counter peoples’ assumptions. Lance valued the way Ed never asked the youth to change themselves, dress differently, or compare themselves to other youth groups. Instead, their identities were affirmed (“you guys are your own thing”) and, most importantly, backed with the support and guidance that helped them succeed in projects they took on together.

Challenging Expectations

Many young adults said that the elders’ expectations challenged them. While the elders supported them holistically and elicited their contributions at the Youth Space, the young adults understood that how they contributed mattered. The questions elders asked and the way they facilitated conversations at the Youth Space reinforced the idea that the youth were to critically engage and participate through their actions and their ideas. The elders often encouraged the youth to explore ideas and issues that came up in conversation and develop well-informed opinions. For example, Julie remembered, “[Ed]

just made a point to continue to get us involved in the issues that are happening in the community and to always be asking questions and always be trying to like figure out ways to create change” (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012). Cyreta recalled the way Ed and Aaron would urge the youth to think about policy issues that affected them: “we did have Mr. Ed and Aaron being like, ‘hey, that’s not right, remember your policymaker said this. . . . That’s not right; think about it’” (Cyreta, personal communication, March 2, 2012). Thinking hard about social issues deepened their engagement with one another and with their community.

One of Adrian’s experiences illustrated how the expectations at the Youth Space challenged him. Describing his early videography work with Ed, Adrian used the phrase “my community eyes wasn’t opened yet.” When I asked him to tell me about his awakening, he responded,

[Ed] wouldn’t let me just pass a mediocre. . . . Ed doesn’t accept that or anybody that was around didn’t accept that, you know. If I said something, I had to back it up. And they would not let [me] say something and not back it up. (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012)

A young man who enjoys learning from others by debating and challenging their ideas, Adrian cited not “pass[ing] a mediocre” as a way to engage him intellectually and make him see people and problems in his community differently. Adrian went on to talk about the Youth Space practice of discussing “root issues” as a factor that opened his “community eyes” and a means to honor humanity.

Several other key phrases further reveal the level of intellectual engagement and

challenge that became the norm at the Youth Space. At the first group meeting among the young adults and elders to discuss this research project, the group members wondered aloud about what made a difference for getting and keeping them involved. Aaron asked, “How did we get you in the door?” to which Adam responded, “You made us think and open our eyes!” Adam then explained how Aaron would introduce challenging or controversial ideas (what Aaron called a “golden nugget”) that would launch the group into substantive conversations (field notes, February 12, 2012). Julie pointed to the importance of her elder, Amy, challenging her to “prove it” or back her statements with research, which fostered a sense of discovery and ownership over her ideas. Adrian’s, Julie’s, and Adam’s descriptions demonstrate how elders communicated these expectations clearly and directly to youth though always interwoven with affirmation and guidance.

Julie said the expectations of thorough and thoughtful contributions to discussions gave her the freedom to be herself, something she did not experience in other settings.

[I was] labeled the nerd. . . . [I] always wanted to, like, talk about philosophical things and just wanted to like learn. . . . I was always like kind of shunned in places, like, “people don’t want to talk about that all day” and I understood. . . . But our chilling time at [the Youth Space], once I was there was, like, all the stuff that I wanted to do. . . . You could, you know, really challenge yourself and your thoughts and other peoples’ thoughts and really be able to do that with people that are considered friends, practically family, and just feel comfortable, like, it was just home.

. . . *I was also labeled the “problem child.” So I always, like, was really feisty and would, tell you how I felt about anything, and the moment you . . . looked at me as if you wanted my opinion, like, there you go. And [the Youth Space] really gave me a space to develop that and make it into a skill or a talent versus a thing that, like, turned people away. So, I was able to learn how to give my opinion and give criticism or feedback that was, um, that was more appreciated.* (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012)

The shared expectations and safety of the Youth Space provided an outlet for Julie’s desire to learn and discuss philosophical ideas with people she trusted and who had similar her interests. Considering these friends, “practically family,” and the Youth Space, “home,” Julie emphasized the importance of feeling comfortable to discuss challenging topics. She also said the Youth Space environment and her experiences there helped transform her tendency to share her opinion bluntly into a strength that enabled her to engage in productive and meaningful discussions within and beyond the Youth Space.

Adam and Lance also discussed the elders’ long-term expectations. Adam pointed out that his elders were explicit about their long-term vision for their mentees. He said, “They made it very explicit [emphasis]. ‘Give back, like, at some point, give back.’ Like, I remember Aaron telling us ‘Sometime, soon, you guys are gonna need to play my role and you will have a group of young men that you need to mentor.’” (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012). Adam said he kept in mind that “there’s a lot of people

betting on me” (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012), as he navigated young adulthood. Lance explained that his elders’ unconditional support and guidance over the years had been a “long process [and] a lot of experiences” and pointed out that “it would be [an] epic fail if any one of us was to make a drastic turn to the right where we just all the way off the path” (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012). Experiencing this level of acceptance and commitment from their elders gave the youth greater self-confidence and instilled a sense of responsibility to make good decisions. These young adults’ sense of responsibility to serve others stemmed from their appreciation for all that their elders had invested in them and the group’s vision for improving their community and contributing to the generational struggle for justice.

In addition to being intellectually engaged by the challenging expectations at the Youth Space, Adam emphasized the important role of his mentors in deepening his learning and personal growth. Adam’s one-on-one mentorship with Aaron provided flexible and ongoing food for thought that incorporated Adam’s lived experience into a growing understanding of the African American counternarrative, helping him envision his role in co-authoring it. Chapter 5 featured Adam’s response to reading Assata Shakur’s autobiography, which resonated with his experience of tracking in junior high and tapped into his interests in history. Adam went on to explain how Aaron helped him extend his learning:

so from there, [I] just started really getting’ more into my identity as a man and as an African American man, um, in America. . . . So from there just started connecting with Aaron and he, of course, was supporting my

whole growth in that area, so he would supply me with books and different YouTube videos to watch and different people to kind of Google and learn about and Wikipedia about and different things to kind of watch and observe and things.

Below, Adam described how he continues to contemplate his identity and how his experience with his mentors guides his work with youth:

I think it shapes a lot of what I do. . . . I'm constantly in that frame of, like, I know who I am, um. I know where I come from. I'm starting to get an understanding of where I come from. . . . I think it's about just helping other people realize where they are, um, and just doing the same thing for me. For somebody else that, like, Aaron and Ed and everything they did for me, um, because without them, I wouldn't have, I would have never got into anything. Um, I think then like me having an interest in that and, like, social awareness and social action . . . even the stuff that I do now with leadership . . . [and], more universal concepts other than, um, just, like, civil rights. (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012)

Pointing to Aaron and Ed as individuals who helped foster his personal awareness and cultural identity, Adam explained his aim to mentor others. Ed's and Aaron's guidance provided continuity between the summer Freedom School that drew Adam in and the Youth Space's ongoing activities, which supported Adam's learning and established relationships that he continues to draw on as a young adult. Adam's story shows the way he and his peers found a level of acceptance, affirmation, challenge, and

engagement at Youth Space that offered an outlet for their intellectual and personal growth. This level of challenge and engagement was rooted in trusting relationships and shared commitments that the group held.

Opportunities for Youth Contributions

The youths' participation and contributions were invited and affirmed in the range of activities that were happening at the Youth Space. As Adrian stated earlier in this section, "once I got involved it kind of was something else, something else, something else. . . . You realized you took ownership of it" (Adrian, personal communication, May 19, 2013). The young adults recalled their initial entrance into the Youth Space as casual, almost "stumbling into" meetings or conversations, in which Ed invited their contributions. For them, their involvement at the Youth Space led to sustained involvement and deeper engagement. Adam remembered his surprise at being drawn into a meeting:

I happened to just go into Community Church one day, wasn't nobody else in there. I went downstairs and [names adults in the room] and I seen them and I was about to leave 'cause it looked like they was doing something important. They was, like, "no, come on, come sit down." And through there I just stayed there. . . . They started asking me, you know, what I think. I'm, like, "Oh, me?" (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

This casual interaction took place shortly after Adam's participation in a summer Freedom School, but before he became involved in the Youth Space during the school

year. In fact, stumbling into the meeting and being invited to share his ideas were also the beginning of his involvement with Go Peace, which led to numerous opportunities throughout high school and continued into his career as a young adult. Julie also recalled “stumbling into” a similar meeting while visiting the Youth Space for the first time:

they were planning on this huge international conference. . . . And I've always been like a really outspoken person, but I had to remind myself that I'm visiting this place with a friend and I couldn't really give my opinion, but I had so many that it was hard. I was sitting in the back and I was listening to everybody . . . and Ed goes, "Do you have any ideas?" to me. . . . I just like exploded, like, "I think that you should say this and do this and when you ask the question, ask it this way, do it this way." And [I] just had so many ideas that he finally just asked me, like, "Well, are you busy between this time and this time? And could you be here for this?" And I'm, like, "Yeah, of course!" And I just been a part ever since.

(Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012)

Julie ended up joining Ed, several peers, and the youth-development professionals with the local Go Peace affiliate at the national Go Peace conference in another state.

Adam and Julie expressed surprise at Ed's informal and open way of soliciting their input and getting them more deeply involved. In Julie's case, inviting her to travel to the conference meant allocating resources and integrating her into an existing group.

Thus Ed was not only casual and open about drawing youth in, but he was also willing to invest time and funds to make it happen.

Stepping Stones: Giving Youth Leadership Roles

Ed invested in youth in other ways to get them involved. Cyreta was not yet part of the Youth Space but knew Ed from a nearby coffee shop when he asked her to lead a girls' group with Michelle. She recalled,

I never really went to, uh, [the Youth Space]. Ah, I never really went until later on, until Mr. Ed offered, uh, Michelle and I to do a girls' group. . . . [That was], like, my first, like, you know, "here's your push, here's your push, close the door, here you go, go for it," was with Mr. Ed. And he really trusted Michelle and I, he trusted us with those girls and we never really thought about it. We never really thought about it until, like, recently. Like, wow, we were babies. We were babies running the roost. Like, . . . everyone in that building was, like, family, like, so it's, like, we were coming to work but not knowing, like, we were building all of these skills so as far as, like, outreach and going to get young people. . . . We knew we had a job to do, but, like, it never was, like, that type of pressure.

(Cyreta, personal communication, March 2, 2012)

Given a leadership role despite being new to the Youth Space and seeing the level of trust Ed demonstrated helped Cyreta feel confident and comfortable, rather than pressured, and ready to take on the responsibility of co-leading the girls' group. Cyreta expressed surprise at the trust Ed gave and the scope and importance of her role recruiting participants from the neighborhood and mentoring them. The recognition that she had valuable skills and experience to lend to the work, along with the support of staff and

peers in the building, fostered her agency for doing outreach with girls.

Curious about Ed's level of trust and investment in the above stories, I asked, "Why did you entrust [the youth] with things when you knew so little [about them]?" He responded,

Because I believe that all young people have value and all young people need to be encouraged to exercise their gifts. And the way that you can best encourage them is by giving them small stepping-stones to celebrate themselves, that we can affirm them as a community. (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

Before Ed knew the youth well, his team was affirming their value by inviting the contributions or drawing them out, which sometimes involved giving them leadership opportunities.

Several young adults noted that their initial involvement in a meeting, event, or project—involvement that they thought was short-term—led to additional opportunities. Above, Adrian described this process: "Once I got involved, it kind of was something else, something else, something else. . . . If you showed [Ed] something, he would take it" (Adrian, personal communication, May 19, 2013). Similarly, Julie said, "It's always been one thing after another" to explain how the counternarrative made her want to learn more to inform her contributions to the community (Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2013). After the Freedom School summer that cemented peer relationships, Lance recalled that projects "snowballed from there, you know, staying connected with Ed," who later gave them a video project that led to the creation of the videography company

(Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012). The informal invitations for them to play a part at the Youth Space gave them the choice to be involved. Having their contributions affirmed along with subsequent opportunities to contribute kept them engaged over time. The young adults described not always knowing what a project or partnership would entail, but trusting that their elders' would be there to support them.

Exposure: Opportunities with Support that Span Boundaries

The young adults also recognized the wide array of people and opportunities that they had been exposed to through the Youth Space. The “something else, something else, something else” (Adrian, personal communication, May 19, 2013) of rolling prospects expanded as Ed used his personal and professional network to connect the young people to other endeavors. Sometimes that meant bringing resources to the youth; other times it meant casually inviting them “[to] the table” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014) early on in meetings and discussions that later led to partnerships or broader initiatives. Often, it meant supporting the youth’s involvement with other organizations and urging them to pursue their interests. The process of getting involved around the city and neighborhood became more dynamic as the youth got older and “took ownership of that network,” suggesting trainings and initiatives that interested them (Ed, personal communication, August 8, 2014).

Several young adults’ stories capture the dimensions of exposure they experienced. Cyreta stated, “Mr. Ed’s always doing exposure. . . . He’s really big with exposure” (Cyreta, personal communication, March 2, 2012), as she began to describe the connections that led to her involvement with the Youth Space. As an employee at a

coffee shop near the church, Cyreta knew several of the teens from Youth Space as customers. Later, Ed and the coffee shop owner made an arrangement to have the Youth Space teens volunteer their work in exchange for training at the store. During this time, Cyreta and Ed got to know each other and Ed asked her to lead a girls mentorship group with Michelle. Meeting Ed and joining the Youth Space offered Cyreta another meaningful outlet for her passion for mentoring younger girls, similar work she had done in high school.

This coffee shop connection was also significant for Adrian. He recounted the story of how he and his peers wanted to start a café in the church. Ed's response was to expose them to the experience and give them the skills they would need through his arrangement with the nearby coffee shop's owner. After the volunteer period ended, Adrian was hired. The job not only offered him a relatively stable income at a young age but also fostered a strong relationship with the shop's owner, whom Adrian said he considered an elder. Launching from this example, Adrian described the Youth Space as "our HQ, our headquarters. . . . We go to [the Youth Space], we meet, we have fun, though, but we always was doing something. We, we never stayed at [the Youth Space]. . . . But we came and we talked about what was happening in our different organizations" (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012). The young adults defined the Youth Space as a place to relax and have fun as well as to reflect, solve problems, and learn from their experiences at school, home, work, or the organizations where they volunteered. These thoughtful discussions provided opportunities for them to apply the commitments in action and enact their sense of agency across the various spaces they

traversed.

Ed also leveraged his connections to help youth succeed in reaching their personal goals. Adrian recalled how the youth recognized the need to improve their public-speaking skills and how Ed reached out to a member of Toastmasters to meet that need:

We say we want to be an advocate for people, we want to, so how can we do that, though, if we don't know how to talk, we don't know how to communicate? . . . Ed got a lot of connections with people, so somehow he got a Toastmasters to be, because Toastmasters you've got to be 18 or they have their own rules about, like, who's going to be in Toastmasters at the time. So somehow he got a person who, a lady that teach Toastmasters that come to us, which was somehow amazing. (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012)

Adrian's framing of the problem—the group wanted to advocate for people but struggled to communicate their ideas—illustrated how their sense of agency to speak out in the community drove them to identify and address barriers to being heard and understood. The Toastmasters' example was a clear sign of Ed's approach of first engaging young people and then “develop[ing] the tools and the delivery systems they need to be successful” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). Several young adults said their participation in Toastmasters helped them as they became more involved in other organizations, especially a local government board; began to work with youth; and interact with their parents in after-school programs. Adrian, who struggles with a stutter, went on to describe the way experience transformed him and gave him the confidence to

express himself. He recalled, “I was fluent! . . . People could understand me. And the message got across” (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012).

Michelle reflected on the way the elders supported the young peoples’ involvement in a range of activities and helped them be purposeful about their choices. She explained,

Like, if there is a program that I wanted to know about or wanted to be a part of . . . Mr. Ed and even Aaron and Amy, I mean, they gave us tools to say, “well, did you call someone? Did you connect with them and find out what they’re about?” Kind of that sense of, “I don’t have to be behind everything. Like, go do it yourself.” Like, “you have all the tools and the capabilities to go out there and figure out whether you want to be a part of this program or not. Or whether you want to work with these youth or not.” (Michelle, personal communication, May 2013)

Michelle’s words note the way that her elders’ affirmed the young people and backed up that affirmation with questions and follow through that helped the youth make decisions and learn from their actions. These conversations also uncovered ways that the elders could support the youth in their pursuits by, for instance, giving them rides to events and meetings with other organizations.

Moving Onward and Outward: Transitions with Support

Adam recalled feeling ambivalent his senior year when Ed’s encouragement to “branch out” became more frequent and his efforts to send Adam and his peers to other opportunities intensified. Thinking about the months leading up to graduation, Adam

said,

The last year that we were at [the Youth Space], he used to always, like, encourage us to branch out. [Adam as Ed:] “Go find, go find a job. Do [an after-school program], do something else. Like, you have to do something else.” Like, I just remember him always, like, encouraging us. And it kind of felt, like, he was pushing us away at the same time sometimes. (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012)

In paraphrasing Ed’s words, “do something else. Like, you have to do something else,” Adam captures the way he sensed Ed’s urgency increasing as graduation approached. Adam first described Ed’s behavior as “encouraging us” but then used the phrase “pushing us” instead. Adam next explained how he found himself affiliated with numerous organizations the summer after he graduated and how he continued to rely on his elders for support and guidance:

that summer [Ed] was, he was definitely phasing us out because we were spending less and less time at the church. . . . That’s when [an initiative Ed asked him to join] first got started. . . . I was branching out with the Youth Council. [Ed] set that up. . . . So, everything we were doing, it was, like, it was a collaborative with other groups . . . so just getting that experience, but still being able to, like, go back to Ed and, like, talk about what we learned and what our frustrations were. . . . We talked to Aaron, too . . . him just being a supportive person right there. . . . He put it all into context for us. (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012)

Processing the experience as he spoke about it, Adam clearly appreciated the set of opportunities that he had that summer and came to understand why he and his peers were being encouraged to “branch out.” Adam continued to seek his elders for their insights and support, and as will be discussed in the final Findings chapter, he and others continue to do so. During his time at the Youth Space, Adam was exposed to a professional network that allowed him and several of his peers to pursue their commitments in action by working with social justice– and community-oriented youth-development organizations across the metropolitan area. Accessing these avenues to work toward the common good supported the young adults’ identities as change-makers, a theme discussed in Chapter 8.

“Accountability Community”: Ed’s Synopsis

In response to my brief verbal synopsis of the themes discussed in this chapter, Ed offered the phrase “accountability community” to describe what he had heard and experienced over the years:

our little center, [the Youth Space], became an accountability place for them where they would check on each other. “And, OK, have you been going to school, Adrian? Or you been doing this? What’s happening here?” So, that whole sense of what community really should be and that place of accountability, the place of acknowledgement, of affirmation of who you are, of self. But also a place where I’m feeling worthwhile. And the definition of worthwhile for me is really the concept that I am needed for the village to survive . . . and that’s accountability. . . . And so part of

that accountability is the ability to understand that, using a Bible phrase, that all things are lawful for me, but not all things are expedient. Meaning that you may have the right and the freedom to do it and say what you want to say. But it may not be expedient for the community for you to say that. Are you considering with your empathetic spirit what's happening around you? And that is accountability. So, it's just not because somebody's in my face and somebody's keeping me on track, or I'm keeping somebody on track. But it's also that ability to say I'm empathetic with others around me.

Ed's "accountability community" weaves together many ideas the young adults described as important throughout this chapter. Care for one another and empathy are at the foundation of the accountability, establishing a positive, affirming tone for relationships and interactions within the accountability community and beyond. Ed's definition of "worthwhile" was: "I am needed for the village to survive." The young adults came to embrace this idea as they drew connections between the counternarrative and their lived experiences, as they embraced the counternarrative and the necessity of their contributions to it, and as they worked on projects at the Youth Space and spoke out in their neighborhood.

Ed's paraphrasing of the Bible verse from 1 Corinthians 6:12 about considering what was best for one's community and the people in it above one's individual freedom or self-interest echoes the core commitments to honor humanity and serve others and reflects the moral dimension of the accountability community's shared norms. Their

experiences in this accountability community fostered their agency to enact social change. The young adults' relationships with peers and elders, the shared commitments practiced within and beyond the Youth Space walls, and the balance of challenge and support all fostered a coalitional agency that incorporated their shared experiences, commitments, and the counternarrative they embraced.

A Story of Enacting Agency in the Community

This section details the importance of their neighborhood as a place where the young adults recognized the counternarrative and enacted their sense of agency for change. It includes their stories of how they were exposed to struggles, issues, and people in their neighborhood. They shared these examples in response to my questions about times they felt like they had really “made a difference” or “surprised themselves” with what they took on and were able to accomplish. Within this accountability community, they experienced affirmation of their identities and contributions as well as accountability to live out their shared commitments to honor others' humanity and serve others. Their discussions and critical understanding of community issues built a sense of coalitional agency and made taking action and speaking out a natural next step. Their neighborhood was the first place where they enacted their sense of agency and fostered their identities as change agents.

Lance, Adam, Julie, and Adrian all noted one particular summer as having greatly impacted them and the way they saw their roles in the neighborhood. While some had attended or helped lead previous Freedom Schools, they had not been very involved in the Youth Space during the school year until after the summer of 2006. That summer,

several youth asked Ed and the other staff to try the high school level of Freedom School for the first time. Adam, who was one of those youth, remembered, “Everybody that was working at Freedom School kind of let us run wild with the idea. . . . [We] came up with our own ideas, and they just supported everything we did and made sure that we had the resources to get it done” (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012). The group did several “action projects” in the community, which they recalled with pride.

Several stories about that summer began with a description of the wave of gun violence that was sweeping the community at the time. Rather than paraphrase their powerful, painful words, I have included some of the descriptions the young adults used to relate the context of that summer:

Lance: “. . . this was like around, like right when [a young man] got shot. . . . And so, it was deep, it was deep to the point like I didn’t think, we didn’t know it was gonna get that deep. I mean, we knew we was trying to make a message . . . [goes on to describe one of the activities they did].

(Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Adam: “. . . summer of ’06 and the homicide hit like 65 that summer.⁵

Sixty-five murders and everybody was dying that summer . . . the June 10 killings, . . . [the victims] were people who everybody knew and kind of respected. [A young woman] got killed that summer . . . so just us knowin’, like, most of the people, most of the kids who were getting’ shot and gettin’

⁵ The city’s 2006 homicide rate varies by data source. The U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigations recorded 57 homicides. From U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigations (2007). Table 8, *Crime in the United States*. Retrieved from http://www2.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2006/data/table_08_mn.html

killed. (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012)

Amid those traumatic events and the overwhelming feeling of grief, the Freedom School participants were learning the counternarrative of African American struggles for social, economic, and political justice. They were embracing their responsibility to contribute to the counternarrative amidst the wave of homicides in the neighborhood. As the young adults' stories below illustrate, the pain, anger, and fear in the community at the time together with the youth feeling emboldened and supported as they sought to "make a message", created a formidable synergy.

Adam said his experience that summer "changed [his] whole experience about Freedom School and what it was really about" (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012). He described the way staff facilitated discussions about books they read that summer to incorporate what was happening in the community and how these intense discussions engaged him intellectually and related to his own experiences (Adam, personal communication, February 12, 2014). He also pointed to how they planned action projects deliberately out in community:

Everything we did, and I think that was very intentional on Ed and Aaron and Amy's part, um, to not just have us in the building, but to have us go out into being involved in the community, I think without that, it wouldn't've been the same. (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012)

For Adam, this summer was the one he described as "life-changing" and that led to him explore his racial identity. At the same time, embracing and enacting his sense of agency

in the community alongside his peers was important for him.

The young adults related several activities they launched that summer, mostly with the goal of speaking out against gun violence. Below, Lance described a community vigil on a busy street corner at the heart of the neighborhood.

We had this big . . . board that had all these little [paper] crosses on 'em. . . . People were able to come by and write a little RIP, and the part that got me, was, like, watching people write the names on there. . . . They walking past, they see the message, we talking to them, and they seeing the young folks out there, like, doing their thing, but then, like, for that to hit home. . . . This is for [victim of shooting], this is for [another victim], this is for [another victim]. . . . It was just like, you know, our own . . . community vigil, you know. We had vigils for schools, for individuals all the time, but this was the one time we wanted to recognize all our loss and was like, whether they had been lost ten years before that day or they had been lost two weeks before that day. Like, we just wanted to make sure that people was able to recognize them at that time. And so, you know, just seeing, like, some of the toughest cats, 'cause, you know, I got a large family, so I done seen a lot and I know a lot of people who, yes, they are those tough guys that we talk about in our meetings. And to see them walk up and as they're writing, they have to stop, and, like, wipe their face. You know, and it's, like, these cats is human. You know, like, and then, it was, like, at that point that it made me realize that this is very important that we spread

this message . . . and work with these people regardless of what people think of us. (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Seeing the emotions and grief of these “tough cats,” young men affiliated with gangs, was powerful. Lance noticed that the message he and his peers sought to communicate had “broken through” the rough image the young men projected. For Lance, seeing these men’s humanity seemed to give him hope, affirming his conviction that they should not be written off and were capable of change. Lance’s commitment to social-justice work reflected the mix of grief and hope he expressed in his earlier story about his brothers (one was killed and the other is out of jail and “doing straight”).

Adam described another project in which he and his peers prepared and delivered soapbox addresses. Below, Adam recounted the process and how it impacted him:

we researched different peoples’ soapbox speeches and, like, how they would just, they would just go on a corner and holler or just stand on a bus and just start going. It wasn’t nothin’ written, but it was just somethin’ they was passionate about and they wanted people to hear. So, we did our own soapbox speeches. So, we had a bullhorn out there. Um, so everybody got a chance to go to say somethin’, the cars was honkin’ by, honkin’ at us. Um, and it was tight. I got up, I remember I got up and spoke, and it was just, it was real cool to be able to do that. So, that whole experience it was, it was very powerful as far as a number [of youth] steppin’ outside that comfort zone and bein’ on [street name] interacting with people on the streets, and seein’ that they’re respondin’ well to us doin’ positive, um,

especially that summer because it was so depressed and a lot of stuff.

(Adam, personal communication, May 8, 2012)

The soapbox speeches were an opportunity for the youth to stand up and speak publicly about the violence at a time when grief and fear dominated the neighborhood.

Highlighting the historical significance of these addresses, Adam seemed to find a sense of solidarity with the tradition. He described himself and his peers as “a number [of youth] steppin’ outside that comfort zone” to talk in a very public space—emphasizing the importance of their coalitional agency that helped them overcome their anxieties. In that “powerful” experience, the group mustered the courage to share their ideas, and their efforts to “[do something] positive” were met with affirmation from drivers and passersby. Adam reiterated the importance of peoples’ positive responses: “just for that bein’ one of my first experiences where, like, bein’ involved with the community. . . . Like, people was honkin’ at us and supportin’ us and everything, so there was a lot of love out there” (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012). Adam had a sense that the young peoples’ soapbox speeches countered the prevailing “depressed” feeling in the community that summer.

In summary, the youths’ resonant experiences that summer changed their worldviews. In the previous chapter, Lance articulated a difference in the way he would respond if he saw someone doing something wrong in his neighborhood, from an attitude of “I’m not gonna get myself involved ’cause it had nothing to do with me” to a feeling he had to say something because “there was somebody who . . . stopped and said something [to me].” Julie reflected on Freedom School as a point where she came to see

herself as a “social-justice” person:

from then on, it was just, like, you know, we were just social-justice people, like, for the rest of our lives. It was just nothing, couldn't go back. . . . [Ed] would always say, like, “once you know the problem, you can't ignore it.” (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012)

Julie articulated an awakening that made her feel unable to “go back to . . . [her] small little world and doing whatever [she] want[ed]” (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012). It changed how she saw herself in her neighborhood and in the world. Julie emphasized how her newfound awareness that “there’s people all over that are suffering from different injustices” affected the way she saw her choices and actions (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012). In the passionate, action-oriented way that was a trademark of her personality, she described the feeling that she could no longer “do whatever [she] want[ed]” and felt an urgency to “be working towards making something better” (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012). Julie later discussed how her view of herself as a social-justice person meant that she “couldn’t just donate money [to social justice causes]. [She] would have to be there. Like, [she] would have to do things” (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012). Referencing the historical counternarrative, she posed the questions: “What would it have been like if . . . Rosa Parks just gave money or Martin Luther King just gave money? . . . That would make the difference in what this community would look like today” (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012). A reflection of her vision for herself as a change agent building on the legacy of those before her, Julie’s transformation into a “social-justice

person”—a shift in her self-concept—was influenced by taking concrete actions alongside her peers.

Discussion

In this chapter, the young adults described the relationships and experiences that influenced their beliefs about themselves as change agents. Their trusting, respectful relationships with their elders affirmed and challenged them. The opportunities and support for expressing their ideas and taking action in the community developed various personal and professional skills and fostered ownership of their contributions. The virtuous circle of assets—supportive relationships, deep engagement in projects and initiatives, and numerous opportunities in the community—constitute the “accumulative power” discussed in youth-development and thriving literature (Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain, 2011; O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). Furthermore, the extent to which the young adults drew connections between the relationships with elders and the Youth Space norms as influencing their sense of who they are and how they interact with the world, points to the fruitful identity development that occurred at the Youth Space (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003; O’Connor, 1997; Ginwright, 2007; Eccles & Barber, 1999).

The young adults’ stories about relationships and experiences that fostered their sense of agency for social change point to the importance of “mattering,” of having “opportunit[ies] to be efficacious and to make a difference in their social worlds” (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 103). Julie and Adam “stumbling into” meetings, having their contributions encouraged and valued, and becoming more deeply engaged, points to the

importance of opportunities for communicating one's perspective and having input in decisions, both dimensions of mattering (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). As O'Donoghue and Kirshner observed in their research, having "opportunity to shape something meaningful increased motivation for young people to engage in [decision-making] processes that are sometimes lengthy and frustrating" (2003, p. 12). Eccles and Gootman also emphasize that mattering means having opportunities to experience "meaningful challenge" (2002, p. 103). The challenging expectations captured in Adrian's idea of not "passing a mediocre" (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012) illustrate the meaningful challenge aspect of mattering. Eccles and Gootman emphasize, "'opportunity' is not experienced as 'challenge' unless youth identify with it" (2002, p. 104). In other words, youth, as "agents of their own development" (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 103) must view the challenge as meaningful to them. For instance, Lance viewed his videography skills as a source of pride and a way to counter others' expectations. "Be[ing] an advocate for people" (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012) was a meaningful challenge the group identified with and prepared themselves for, in part, through a Toastmaster's training. Ed's commitment to "not do programming," but to engage and affirm youth, in part by providing "stepping stones to celebrate themselves" (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014) is a clear illustration of mattering (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

The young adults' accounts in this chapter also narrate their journeys to becoming young leaders, articulating key stages of leadership development (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). The chapter features stories of youth "stumbling into" situations that elicited and

affirmed their contributions. In a casual, gradual way, these young adults got involved, deepened their engagement, came to recognize their abilities, seek out new ones, and see themselves as leaders (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). Julie talked about how she learned to give her opinion in a way that was "more appreciated," building communication skills that she has since expanded in professional roles. Adrian related how the young adults' goal to "advocate for people" helped them identify additional skills they needed in order to do so. Michelle's explanation of how her elders pushed her to pursue interests outside the Youth Space encapsulates the strong synergy of challenge and support (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). During a key phase of their development and identity formation, these youth came to see themselves as leaders, began seeking out opportunities to lead, and demonstrated movement within key phases of leadership development (van Linden & Fertman, 1998; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). With a sense of security and belonging to their "accountability community," they took risks knowing that they could "go back" (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012) to their peers and elders to process their learning and plan their next steps. As the next chapter illustrates, the young adults continue to use and benefit from their leadership skills, construct and pursue their visions for themselves as leaders and change-makers, and tap into the coalitional agency that still resides in their accountability community.

Chapter Eight: Navigating Now: Enacting Agency for Change in Young Adulthood

The Findings chapters thus far have demonstrated the complex processes that shaped the study's participants when they were youth. The fourth and final Findings chapter addresses the second research question as it explores the ways the young adults are navigating their personal and professional lives in light of their community activism and their commitments in action. As they seek to balance their ideals with ever-increasing obligations, such as the realities of incurring bills and searching for a consistent paycheck as well as the needs of children and other family members, these young adults encounter avenues and roadblocks to enacting their agency for change.

Through their shared experiences of learning, experiencing, and living out the commitments in action and developing their identities as change-makers, the young adults' sense of coalitional agency built momentum, which at times faltered in young adulthood. These trials reduced the strength and intensity of their sense of agency. Still, the young adults found avenues that allowed them to carry out their commitments in a variety of new ways. The stories in this chapter uncover the ways the young adults sought to enact their sense of agency and visions for themselves in early adulthood, the challenges they faced, and how they navigated and learned from them. The first section highlights the challenges faced by the young women who attended college. The second section follows Adam and Lance's experiences of recovering from times of isolation and struggle. In the third section, the young adults describe the way they continue to rely upon their relationships with one another and with their elders. The fourth section focuses on individual young adults' perspectives or struggles to illuminate the way each person

enacts his or her sense of agency uniquely in young adulthood.

College: Navigating Roadblocks

Among the first possible conduits for realizing their visions of themselves as change agents was attending college. For those who graduated from high school, pursuing a college degree was the automatic next step, one their parents encouraged or expected. The youth all balanced one or more part-time jobs, often related to youth development, with classes. Their persistence in higher education varied greatly by gender. Lance and Adam pursued college multiple times but dropped out, instead seeking professional opportunities in the youth-development network they had initially been exposed to at the Youth Space. Michelle, Julie, and Cyreta persisted in college despite difficulties along the way. Regardless of the outcome, their journeys were tough. This section articulates some of the challenges the young adults faced and how they navigated them.

Going “away”

Most of the young adults felt disconnected from their community while in college, even if they were attending institutions only a few miles from home. They were navigating spaces where they encountered the dominant narrative of individualism and where they were seen as “other.” Each of the stories below illustrates different dimensions of this separateness. Michelle attended a local, private college, where she was one of the few African American students, and then transferred to a local technical college. She described a particularly memorable moment that contributed to her decision to leave the institution:

So I remember, like, [a] prime example. You know, I was sitting in an economics class and not being taught to, you know, not talking about, you know, how economics affects urban communities, you know, in contrast to, um, suburban communities or rural communities, and I just remember sitting there, like, I can't do this, definitions and, you know like, terms and that doesn't matter to me if I can't connect it to where I've been all my life and what I've seen. (Michelle, personal communication, March 15, 2012)

Michelle emphasized the disconnect between her learning, in this case, economics, and her lived reality. She expressed a desire to talk about how economics affects various communities, including her own. She went on to describe the positive experience she had at the local technical college, highlighting the discussions among students and professors in a poetry class. The two courses (economics and poetry) Michelle described as examples of her negative and positive experiences, respectively, were vastly different, making comparison difficult. But it was Michelle's experience of the institution and classroom environments that mattered, as this later reflection reveals:

maybe this is what college is for, but [private institution] certainly helped me and, like, just the eye-eye-opener fact of, like, every community is not your community. [Private institution] community is not [neighborhood], you know what I mean? . . . You know, the interactions with suburban white kids who have never had to be in close quarters with African Americans. Um, a lot of that stuff was, my awareness kicked in finally when I went to [private institution]. My awareness . . . it was those things,

um, that made Community Church [specifically, its Freedom School] come to life for me. . . . Like, oh, that's what they were teaching me!
(Michelle, personal communication, March 15, 2012)

While Michelle did not provide specific examples, she broadly articulated her experience of feeling like an outsider in a largely white, middle-class student population. She then related how she talked through her struggles with Cyreta and Julie, who framed her experience in terms of the counternarrative and struggle, helping her realize the importance of the affirming, courageous ideals she was exposed to in Freedom School.

Cyreta, too, felt like an outsider when she encountered the dominant narrative about her neighborhood in her classes at a large public institution. She said,

I feel like people really don't realize how beautiful [neighborhood] is. . . . I fight all the time in class for people to see the beauty in [neighborhood]. Like, they only get what the news shows them. . . . We [students in her program of study] have football players that come up from Texas and they hear I'm from [neighborhood], and they say, "Oh, our coach told us to never go over there." You can get in more trouble here on campus that you can over in [neighborhood]! So, like, what does that mean? So, like, people label us as, like, slums of the slum." (Cyreta, personal communication, March 2, 2012)

Cyreta poignantly communicated a mix of emotions: bitterness, frustration, pride, and a commitment to change the primary view of her neighborhood. Cyreta expressed anger that her experience of her community (as beautiful) is so different from the version that

she heard her classmates held.

Altogether, Cyreta's and Michelle's stories highlight the ways they encountered the dominant narrative in higher education and how they responded. For Cyreta, defending her community by asserting a counternarrative was one way she addressed her frustration. Despite alienating experiences like this one, she persisted and completed her degree. Michelle, on the other hand, opted to transfer to an institution where she felt less dissonance between her lived experience and the institutional and classroom culture.

Coming Back to Serve My Community

Several young adults framed higher education as an investment that they will use to give back or serve others. Thinking about her future investments in education, Cyreta said,

I feel like even if I left to go to another city, say for grad school because that'd probably only be it, it would just for me to personally grow. I could not see myself just leaving and going to help another community. Like, it's not that I'm scared of it, or nothing, I can't. . . . You know, I grew up on [names intersection], I went to [names community school], I went to [names community preschool], like . . . [neighborhood] is me. And I could not see myself getting my education and leaving and going somewhere else. If I went somewhere else, it would, to get a new experience from a different environment, and I will always come back home to let my girls or my girls' group or whoever know, like "Hey, I did it, I'm from where you're from, you can do it too." Or, like, "I've been through high school

without any babies, and I made it through college without any babies, and I made it through.” (Cyreta, personal communication, March 2, 2012)

Cyreta expresses a deep commitment to her community, saying she could not see herself “leaving and going to help another community.” She frames her education both as an opportunity for personal growth and another means to be an example for girls. Cyreta’s vision for herself as a role model illustrates her commitment to mentoring young women. Julie mentioned a similar aspiration in the personal statement she included in her college application. She described completing her degree as “allow[ing] [her] to climb the ladder and effect more youth . . . [and] creat[ing] yet another success story for youth to hear and aspire for” (Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2012). Both women pursued degrees and careers in youth development, and they envisioned mentoring and advocating for youth as a way of contributing to their community and struggling for justice.

Dropping Out and Tapping In: From Disappointment to “Appreciating the Route that We’re On”

For Adam and Lance, who have not yet finished college, both young men experienced housing instability and joblessness. Getting back on their feet first entailed finding stable housing and work. Over time, they gradually accessed the professional network tied to the Youth Space and again experienced interconnected opportunities that revived their sense of agency for effecting change in their community and in the lives of youth.

Lance: “I’m Back”

For Lance, two important layers of connection—to his community and to his

work with youth and the community—renewed his view of himself as a change agent and helped him recover from a difficult period of homelessness and joblessness. His personal struggles had caused him to disconnect from his family and close friends. This partial estrangement was compounded by a geographic separation from his neighborhood, lack of transportation, and his uncertainty about navigating an unfamiliar neighborhood. Lance communicated the relief, sense of belonging, and hope he felt when he returned home: “once we moved back to the [neighborhood], that’s when I was, like, I kind of, like, got back comfortable, and I’m, like, “Okay, well, I’m back.” . . . I can figure somethin’ out over here” (Lance, personal communication, April 27, 2012). More comfortable with his surroundings, Lance drew on his personal network and a friend, who worked at the local grocery, helped him get a job there. Lance said grocery store customers, who recognized him from his previous work with youth and at community events put on by the Youth Space, encouraged him to go back to school and continue to work with young people. This reassurance and the reminders of the things he had done in the past helped Lance get back on track. In fact, one customer, the director of a community organization that does youth development, recognized him from his work in an after-school program and offered him a job. Below he describes some of his thoughts as he transitioned from being disconnected to getting “back”:

how did I go from, like, all of [the projects at the Youth Space] to not working, looking for a place to stay, and all that? And it kind of, like, brought me back, like, you know, “I’m better than this. I’m above this. I done did. I know what I’m capable of.” So, like, now that I’m an adult and

I'm seeing these different doors that are sitting open, it's, like, "well, yeah, I'm definitely going to take advantage of this as a young person. That way, when I get older, you know, those same young people can look to me and be like, "hey, Mr. [Lance], what's up?" You know, "can you holla at Mr. [Adam] about that job?" Like, "I know that's your guy, man?" "Don't trip, I got you, you know." (Lance, April 27, 2012)

Lance expresses disbelief that he could go from being involved in his community and doing work that he cared about to being detached and lacking a job, let alone work that he was passionate about. Returning to his neighborhood and remembering his meaningful involvement there reminded him what he was capable of. Tapping into this dormant sense of agency "brought [him] back" and helped him recognize and pursue opportunities within his network. Over time, Lance resumed doing after-school programs with youth and got started working with social-justice and youth-oriented organizations alongside his mentors, Ed and Paula. Lance not only noted that reconnecting to this network allowed him to meet his needs, but he also articulated a broader vision for serving youth. Describing part of his motivation for "tak[ing] advantage" of his network, he says, "That way, when I get older, you know, those same young people can look to me" to connect them to opportunities. Lance envisions himself (and Adam) as a prominent community advocate, who helps young people the way Lance's own elders helped him.

Adam: "I Knew I Was Just Leaving Everything"

Adam struggled with being separated from the various youth and community

initiatives of the Youth Space. Remembering the months before he left for college, he said, “It was a decision I was struggling with for, like, three months, like, because I knew I was just leaving everything, and, like, I would have to leave and start over. But I wanted, I really wanted to leave and learn as much as I can and come back with . . . a new philosophy. . . . And I still feel like I have to leave in order to be able to serve my community like I want to” (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012). Like Cyreta and Julie, Adam envisioned his education as enabling him to better serve his community. However, while Cyreta and Julie studied at local institutions, which allowed them to continue working part-time in youth work, Adam was unable to find an on-campus job and felt very isolated. He said that returning home over winter break and seeing his friends doing work with the organizations he had worked with in high school through his connections at the Youth Space made him miss that sense of connectedness and agency so much that he decided not to go back to college. Adam then struggled through a time of joblessness and inconsistent housing. Now that he has reconnected with this professional network, he hoped to pay off his student loans so he can go back to college. Despite his return’s positive effects on his sense of agency, as he reflected below, he is still recovering from disappointment about dropping out of college:

it’s taken me just ’til recently just to realize . . . that there’s a difference in, like, [friends who are college students] and then what we do. . . . Sometimes I kind of look at it in, in disappointment or, like, in envy, . . . [but] when I share some of the knowledge that I’ve gained and I’ve received, just through working and experiencing real life, . . . they look at

me like, “damn like, you doing it.” Like, [laughs], and so it’s taken, it’s taken a couple conversations for me to, like, really appreciate the route that we’re [Lance and himself] taking . . . and to be confident in that route, ’cause, like, um, I mean this wasn’t my plan, like, at all. It wasn’t in my plans, didn’t see this happening [laugh], but um, uh, I mean it did and, like, I’m now learning how to, how to appreciate it and how to take advantage of it, like, the important parts of that. (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Adam’s hesitant, thoughtful words summed up his struggle to move from disappointment to hope. He said he had been “soul searching” and becoming more “self-aware” during this difficult time, learning “so much about [him]self that [he] think[s] [he] wouldn’t have learned if [he were] in school.” He was grateful to be able to “grow intellectually and, um, and through experience” and feeling more prepared to re-enter college.

Recovering a Sense of Agency through Youth Work

Adam’s and Lance’s stories explore the ways their sense of momentum met resistance and how they struggled to recover. For both men, returning to their network of professionals and organizations—which shared their commitments in action and shared vision for working in communities and advocating for youth—was central to rebuilding their sense of agency. Below, Lance described how staying in touch with one organization he first encountered at the Youth Space evolved into one of his current jobs:

I would talk to them now and, every now and then, and they finally pulled

me in. . . . [Then] it transitioned into, like, this hybrid where, like, whenever we [indicating Adam] were available, if they need us they call us in. . . . I'm constantly looking to create new partnerships for them.

(Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Lance and Adam also explained how they “revolutionized” (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012) the existing position and created a “hybrid” (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012) role, which took advantage of the men’s relatively flexible schedules (compared to the high-school-age youth the organization mainly serves) to reach out to organizations for potential partnerships and trainings. One collaboration entailed Lance conducting trainings for youth at a local correctional facility. Lance pointed out that the men’s history working with the organization also meant that they had used facilitation techniques and could train and support the high schoolers in learning them. As Adam and Lance talked about this job, they emphasized the importance of having leadership opportunities, the freedom to make decisions and draw on their previous experience, and the flexibility to be creative. Using words like “hybrid” and “revolutionized,” Adam and Lance emphasized the innovative nature of their positions and the way their unique skills and schedules filled a gap in the organization. Their words communicate confidence and a sense of agency both for working directly with youth as well as in navigating the broader network.

Julie and, later, Cyreta worked in similarly innovative ways with Mobilize Youth and as consultants with the city’s youth council while they were in college. Like Adam and Lance, Julie and Cyreta explained how their reputations within and familiarity with

the local youth-development network gave them access to jobs specific to their unique skills, including training high schoolers to take on roles as future youth workers. Now an experienced youth-development professional and well on her way to earning her bachelor's degree, Julie reflected on the way she and several of her Youth Space peers had "branched out" with Ed's guidance.

I think as long as we are all in the [metropolitan area], I feel like there will always be some way of us working together in some capacity. . . . And I never understood, like, Ed's, like, Ed's purpose, but like now that I'm thinking about it, kind of talking about it with you, I see it's more, his idea behind it was [that] there needs to be more of you in other places than all of you in one. . . . Doing the same work but impacting more people. . . . There could be all five of us leading, you know, a leadership camp with one organization. Or we could all spread out and work with five different, you know, orgs at one time and impact so many different young people in so many different communities at once. . . . I just remember him really being intentional on getting us out and, you know, not necessarily away from each other, but independently doing this work. (Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2013)

Julie's statement communicates the depth of her respect for Ed and what she supposed his "purpose" was in facilitating their access to the network. Most importantly and regardless of Ed's actual intentions, Julie's statement illustrates the coalitional agency that resides in her relationships with her Youth Space peers and in her organizational affiliations.

“Accountability Community” Continues to Provide Support, Grounding

Throughout the young adults’ transition into college and careers, the “accountability community” was still very important to many of them. They described their relationships with their peers and elders as grounding them, encouraging them as they faced constraints, and reinforcing their commitments in action and their view of themselves as contributors to a broader counternarrative. They held a vision for themselves as life-long community change-makers, and they carried this sense of solidarity and coalitional agency with them on their individual journeys. This section features their accounts of how they valued and depended on one another and their elders as they made decisions, encountered challenges, and pursued opportunities.

Julie described the way the relationships with peers from the Youth Space were a means to stay committed to their commitments and shared vision:

there are like-minded people, who respect you and also respect the things that you care for and are about. . . . It doesn’t really matter, like, what point I think you get to in our, like, young adult lives. Like, we always kind of have, like, these moments where we check in. I mean it’s always where something’s happening in the community, and even if we’re not able to be like the Youth Space kids that are, like, out in the community doing exactly what we would ideally want to be doing, we may have our lives that are like, restrained, like, constrain us from doing those things—work or school or anything could get in the way of that. But just being able to have those people to call and say, like, “man did you hear about this?” and

being able to talk it out and really have someone that can, you can help bounce those ideas off of and really reflect. It's definitely, it's definitely energizing. It keeps you going. Because you don't feel like it's all for nothing or in vain. Like, you know there's someone else that's on the same wavelength and it's like, "OK, this is fine." (Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2013)

Julie started by noting the importance of being known, understood, and respected. Her statement, “there are like-minded people, who respect you and also respect the things that you care for and are about” points to their commitments and their seeing their group as part of the counternarrative of struggle. Her open acknowledgment that she is respected as a person and for her passion and commitments shows the intertwining of her identity and sense of coalitional agency. Julie mentioned that the shared commitments and like-mindedness in their relationships provided opportunities to tap into their sense of coalitional agency through conversations and discussions. She acknowledged that she and her peers may not always be “out in the community doing exactly what [they] would ideally want to be doing”—implying a preference for community activism—due to constraints in their lives. Julie described thoughtful discussions with her peers as “energizing” and reassuring her that it’s not “all for nothing or in vain” and that the group’s shared commitments are worthwhile.

The young adults also continued to rely on their elders and mentors for guidance in this stage of their lives. For example, Adrian recalled having urgent phone conversations with Ed and Aaron as he processed the news that his girlfriend was

pregnant with his first child. Now a father of four, Adrian visits Aaron's home on a weekly basis and brings his family to Ed's home for dinner occasionally as well. When Cyreta shared about her decision process about taking on part-time jobs while balancing her college classes and other responsibilities, she elucidated how Ed continues to walk alongside the young adults as they make important choices:

now that we are, like, out there now, and we've let go of, you know, everybody's hand and [Ed's] kind of like, "oh, you guys are running now. You're sprinting now. You're doing the work now. . . . Now that you've been out there, what do you like and what don't you like? Or what is your expectations for a workplace?" . . . "What's the reality of your situation now that you guys are all adults, 'cause you're not just now responsible for cellphone bills and, like, tennis shoes," like, some of us are parents now. . . . Mr. Ed is now asking those questions, like, so, "how are you going to eat this month? Do you have time to volunteer and go to school?"

(Cyreta, personal communication, March 2, 2012)

Cyreta's words, "we've let go . . . of everybody's hand," and her paraphrase of Ed's words, "you're doing the work now," reflected her vision for herself and her peers as the next generation of youth workers and, more broadly, as contributors to the counternarrative. Cyreta's words paint a shared vision and tell the story of her sense of coalitional agency as she navigates her professional journey. Her words, again summarizing conversations with Ed, recalled the broad, affirming vision but also reminded her to be thoughtful about her needs, decisions, and increasing responsibilities.

Cyreta communicated her feelings as though her identity as a change-maker was supported and that Ed cared about her as a person—a sentiment that echoed Lance’s description of Ed “deal[ing] with us in our entirety” (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

Individuals Contributing New Dimensions to the Counternarrative

Much of the above sections articulate how the young adults are navigating their worlds. A few described unique ways that they are living that were not fully captured above. Although each subsection below highlights the perspective of an individual—most often the individual that articulated the idea most clearly—the central ideas were often shared by other young adults.

“The Way That I Think It Should Be Done”

Julie shared about a time that she struggled and had a sense of being “away” from the work she hoped to do. She and several peers from the Youth Space had applied for jobs at a new community center in the neighborhood and often provided references for one another. Fresh from high school and with grand visions for continuing community and youth-focused work, they envisioned shaping the new organization in a manner that prioritized youth and their needs and interests. However, the organization’s leadership and established program did not match the young adults’ relationship-based approach. The incongruent visions led to tensions and, gradually, four of the five former Youth Space participants left the organization. Julie summarized what she was thinking as she decided to leave:

[The job was] a consistent paycheck, and it’s comfortable, but, like, are

we following along with what our purpose is? Like, is this what we're supposed to be doing here? And we all left throughout the time at different, for different reasons, but pretty much along the lines of "there's more out there and we're not going to get it if we're here." (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012)

Julie distinguished between "out there" and "here" and shared how her drive to pursue her purpose was more important than the stable lifestyle that came with working for the organization. She aligned her sense of purpose and agency with the "more out there," Julie then articulated what that option looked like and how her agency shifted as she moved from "here" to "out there":

[working at the community center], you didn't really feel like you had any real responsibilities or you didn't really feel like you had any real power. You know what I mean? So, leaving there and kind of having to figure things out on your own, it empowered you. . . . [At first], I was, like, feeling beat down, like . . . I didn't even feel like a real quality youth worker. . . . So it took me a minute to, like, readjust myself and, you know, find confidence in my work again and find passion in it again. . . . And then, just, like, reconnecting with everybody, like I'm working with Bonnie again. I'm working with Mobilize Youth again. I'm working with Ed again, and, like, that's where I belong, you know what I mean? That's what, my purpose is to be doing things in my community constantly, not just working with one organization, being stuck, not being able to bring in

a lot of those resources that young people need. . . . Now I can come in and out of the building and do those programs as I please as a consultant, and I can help young people get connected to those things. I'm not technically tied down and not allowed to do it the way that I think it should be done. (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012)

Julie described how the lack of “real responsibilities” and “real power” at the community center made her doubt her skills as a youth worker. Her emphasis on “real” suggested that she had experienced meaningful responsibilities and power in the past and was jarred by losing them. Reconnecting with the people and organizations she had worked with alongside Ed and Paula in high school reinvigorated her confidence and her passion for the youth work. Julie’s struggle helped her articulate her purpose through a series of comparisons. She described her central aim as “doing things in my community,” rather than being “stuck” in one organization. She opted for a consultant role, working with people and organizations that value her commitments to honor and serve others (especially youth) and that share her vision for social justice. Overall Julie’s realization of “where [she] belong[s]” illustrates the way her commitments (or “purpose”) informed her move to a professional role that enabled her to fully enact her agency for change.

In her reflection, Julie articulated her “purpose” and emphasized the importance of doing youth work “the way that [she] think[s] it should be done.” Julie elaborated on these aspects of her identity and sense of agency as she discussed the rationale behind these decisions. For example, when I asked her about the biggest challenges to doing youth work, she pointed to her tendency to overextend herself. After pausing to reflect,

she responded,

starting momentum and finishing it. . . . So the fact that it's fun for you or the fact that it's important to you or the fact that it's worthwhile to you, at the end of the day, if you're not considering why the young people need it, then it's just not going to be enough. . . . Even though I am a person who has feelings, I'm also a person who is looked up to and counted [on]. . . . I don't want to be a super inconsistent person, but, like, when you put yourself out there so much, it's easy to take on too much. . . . So if I could give anyone a suggestion . . . it's to know what matters to the people who matter to them. So like, if young people really matter to you, then you know what matters to them and you know why you're doing it and you know why it's important to them. (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012)

Julie said that prioritizing the youths' needs and reminding herself of the importance of being someone whom youth can count on helped her be realistic about her time and energy. Julie's commitment to work with youth "the way . . . it should be done"—by being a consistent person with whom youth can have a meaningful relationship—prompted her to weigh their needs and perspectives similar to her own. This intentional approach is an expression of her commitments to honor the humanity of others, in this case, youth.

Julie's response to my question of how she decided what to become or stay involved in and when to move on revealed the way her sense of agency informs her

choices. Thanks to her meeting-facilitation training and her relationship with Paula, she regularly received phone calls asking her to run meetings aimed at engaging youth and adults in partnerships or eliciting information from youth for decision-making purposes. In essence, Julie described how she interpreted the “purpose or the intentions” behind those requests, keeping her commitments in action in mind:

I literally respond to the [calls] that I feel like are beneficial for the community and for my time. . . . If I can tell right in the introduction that it's not, it's not something that young people are going to be a part of throughout the whole process or . . . you're doing a quick survey to see what's going on type of thing. . . . [I choose] things that I know are going to be used to make change. . . . How can you take some of the information and change it into, like, tangible items that you can work on? (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012)

Again, the reasoning behind Julie's choices was informed by her commitments in action and her dedication to serving youth in meaningful, sustainable, and impactful ways. Julie demonstrated an acute focus on her vision for effecting change, in part, by agreeing to work with youth-serving organizations whose “purposes and intentions” match her own.

Cyreta also shared stories from her current work and ongoing professional decisions that illustrated her approach to and vision of youth work. She was integrating culturally relevant material into her after-school program, even though it was not part of the organization's curriculum. Citing research on the importance of such examples, Cyreta explained her choice as part of her commitment to serve youth, rather than

prioritize the stipulations of funders or organizations: “I don’t think I would ever compromise young people’s quality of programming to save my face or to, or to please a CEO or to please my boss or, you know, like, you know what I’m saying?” Cyreta went on to describe how she drew on her college courses as well as her past experiences and ongoing conversations with her elders and peers in her work with youth. After describing how she had recently debriefed an activity with an after-school girls’ group, she explained,

So, those are the questions I feel like if I were in [my elders’] positions, and Sister Amy was, like, my girls’ group teacher, that’s what she would ask me. . . . Then you go off on your own, you know, youth development and whatever theory . . . but I feel like if it wasn’t for Mr. Ed, Aaron, and Amy, I think that, like, half of us would not be the youth workers that we are now, but especially myself. (Cyreta, personal communication, March 2, 2012)

Cyreta spoke about how she drew most directly on concrete relationships and experiences with her elders. Her strong commitment to serving youth and to emulating her elders reflects the confidence that Julie expressed about “how it should be done.”

“Keepin’ It Real With Them”

Lance’s descriptions of how he works with youth in an after-school program reveal his version of how he thinks “it should be done.” Having observed the connection between youths’ behavior in school and at home, Lance said that when he saw somebody acting out in school or in his program, he tried to get a better understanding of any

domestic struggles. He detailed some of the strategies he used to earn the young peoples' trust:

I normally show up to the school early to check in with the kids, um, just, that's just my way of . . . maintaining that level of respect and you know, accountability on my behalf for the kids, 'cause, you know, you get some after-school teachers who say, "yeah, I'll look out for you" and "yeah I'm here for you," yet all they do is show up for program hours. . . . [other after-school teachers:] "I don't got no time to come talk to you about an issue, about something earlier today or anything" . . . [whereas I] just give them the opportunity to connect with me. (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Lance used the words "respect" and "accountability" to explain the goals or outcomes of this simple strategy of showing up early. His availability and willingness to talk with youth one-on-one demonstrated how he honored their humanity and communicated with them so that they can be whole individuals in their relationship with him. Lance's words and rationale echoed the experiences that he and his peers said they valued at the Youth Space.

Lance also drew extensively on his own struggles as a youth to inform his work. Below, he highlighted the importance of having and, later, being a role model for young black men:

when you think about the teachers that helped you out, you can relate to them. And, or if you didn't relate to them, they understood where you were

coming from, you know. Mr. Adams may not have been through everything I went through as a child, but him as a black man, he understands my thought process. . . . Like, I'm working right now with this fourth grader named [child's name]. . . . I haven't touched base on his personal life, like what's going on exactly at home, but noticed that he's been having a lot of struggles. And so, I been just talking to him lately. . . . "Look man, you gotta, you can't be acting up when we in class. . . . You just told me yesterday, you struggle with reading, but then today the teacher's telling me you acting up in reading class." . . . And he's like, "Well, I don't like the teacher." I'm like, "Man, I didn't like none of my teachers that I worked with." You know, like, "at the end of the day, who was this class benefittin'?" He was like, "Me?" And it was, like, when he said that, I was like, "See, this is, OK, I see what they're talking about 'cause I didn't even have to give him the answers, it's like, this is what's up. (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Lance leveraged his past difficulty engaging in school to bond with the child, telling him that he also did not like any of his teachers. While saying he did not necessarily relate to his former teacher, Lance pointed to the importance of Mr. Adams "understanding [his] thought process." Lance used his own experiences to empathize with the boy. By asking the fourth grader whom the class was benefitting, Lance allowed the child to draw his own conclusions, rather than listen to a lecture from Lance—an approach emulating the

“golden nugget” that Lance’s elders, particularly Aaron, had used with him (field notes, February 12, 2012).

For Lance, the way he dressed and “presented” to youth was an especially important aspect of being a role model or mentor. Below, he framed his “image” as an asset in working with youth:

Keepin’ it real with them, being that one, that’s why, a lot of times I don’t like to change my image, because this is what they been seeing. This is how they been seeing me for years, so it’s, like, why all of the sudden now that I’m older, you know, I gotta put on the button-up and put on some dress pants and some dress shoes and all that. . . . That’s not me. You know, like, I’m gonna present to these kids the way I’m presenting and I’m still gonna be respectful about it. You know, there’s a way of still maintaining “your swag,” as the kids would call “your swag” and still be professional about it, you know, and still be able to handle yourself within the business meetings and talk to people. (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012)

Lance described his image as a strategy that enabled him to show youth that it is possible to be a professional, respectful adult while still “maintaining [his] swag.” Lance communicated multiple purposes for maintaining his image. He was sending a message about who he is and refusing to “sell out” to the expectation that being an adult means wearing dress clothes. This personal decision expressed how he contributed to the counternarrative, seeking to challenge peoples’ assumptions. At the same time, he was

aware that he was a role model for the youth, offering an example of what it can look like to embrace express oneself while being professional and respectful. Lance considered the way he “presents” as a unique asset in his work with young men. From his own experience as a young man who looked up to his brothers, and, later, his elders, Lance understood the importance of offering a positive model for youth.

A Long-term Vision to Be People

“Who Went through Some Things and Are Giving Back”

Adrian’s journey into young adulthood diverged from his peers and he followed different avenues for enacting his commitments and sense of agency. A committed father of three (four by the end of the study) without a high school diploma, Adrian prioritized providing for his family by remaining at the community center after several of his Youth Space peers moved on to other jobs. He enacted his agency and pursued his commitments in the way he approached his roles as a father and community member.

Adrian described a broad vision for “becoming a servant” to those around him, pointing first to way he hoped to be remembered, saying,

what would my children’s children say about their great, great grandpa Adrian? “What did he do? . . . What did he contribute to this earth to make my life a little bit better?” . . . I’m not saying, you know, I’m not saying I can do that much, but just saying like if I think in that fashion, though, I might think of a way to help somebody . . . really help them help themselves and help me also. (Adrian, March 27, 2012)

For Adrian, his legacy was part of his co-authoring the counternarrative and effecting change. Keeping this long view helped him frame his daily actions as means to live out his broader commitments in action.

When Adrian talked about raising his children, the broad vision for change took on more concrete terms.

I don't want my kids to grow up knowing the sound of a gunshot . . . to see a dead body in the street, . . . and they're going to see things. But like, as I'm giving them the tools to be able to deal with things, you know? I mean because if I'm not, I'm not doing my job as a dad . . . if the only thing I'm telling them is to punch somebody. . . . Like, you've got to show them more. . . . I want to do something that makes a difference. . . . I mean, I want [my kids] to go through their trials and tribulations and things like that, though, but I don't want them ever having to worry about sleeping at night [and] somebody breaking into my home or sleeping at night and a stray bullet come through my door. . . . I try to do my best, . . . but at the end of the day, though, it's not pointless. But sometimes it feels like you fight against a tidal [wave]. (Adrian, personal communication, May 19, 2013)

Adrian's anguish was evident as he grappled with how he could make a difference in his children's lives and in the community amid the violence in the neighborhood. His reflection began and ended with a sense of despair at the hopeless, unjust reality that he wanted to protect his children from entirely. Sandwiched in the middle was his vision of

himself as a father who prepared his children for the world and helped them learn from their struggles. Although his confidence sometimes faltered, Adrian expressed his resolve to keep struggling to make his community a better place for his children, saying “it’s not pointless. But sometimes it feels like you fight against a tidal [wave].”

In another conversation, I asked Adrian if he ever felt discouraged by the daunting challenges in his life, especially knowing the systems at play in creating those conditions. His response got to the essence of the way being a servant and holding onto his commitments in action gave him hope and determination.

I don't really focus on systematic things necessarily. I focus on people. . . . I just try to live, to do it day by day . . . and it's like, don't let [financial constraints] put me down trying to help other people. No, just because I'm on welfare, you're on welfare, doesn't mean I can't offer you something . . . [discussing his and his wife's aims for being “self-sufficient” and their strategies for reducing food costs and saving \$10 “for a rainy day”]. . . . OK so, now how can I pay it forward? How can I teach somebody else this? So that's, it's like I say it's the baby steps of that. And knowing that there is people out there, who is attacking the big systems and the big systems holding people back. You know, I'm going from a grassroots level. People see me. People know who I am, though. People can trust me. People know I do my best to help them. But you also have people . . . in politics though who, you know, have the same values as me, though, going after the big cats. (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012)

Adrian gave a nuanced understanding of his sense of agency within the structures and forces that impact his life. While he enjoyed debating political, economic, and sociological topics, he saw himself effecting change by teaching people how to budget and become “self-sufficient.” Adrian pointed to his reputation in the community and the way people know and trust him as an asset that uniquely positioned him to serve others in a meaningful way.

In a closing discussion about making a difference in his community, Adrian restated the words of Harriet Tubman, saying,

“I have freed hundreds of slaves, but I could have freed thousands if they only knew they were slaves.” . . . My goal is how . . . how can I help you get to where your Promised Land [is] and your place in your life that looks comfortable and happy for you regardless of who you are. (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012)

Adrian articulated his desire to help other people “think a little bit differently” (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012), and in referencing Tubman’s idea of people not knowing they were slaves, he highlighted the importance of recognizing the way structures of oppression affect people’s lives. For Adrian, one way of being a change agent is in relating to and helping people in his daily life in the hope that they can also see differently and even struggle for change.

In these reflections, Adrian began to articulate a vision for himself as a respected community elder. The other young adults also expressed a surprisingly thoughtful long-term vision of themselves as respected community elders. They emphasized their

intentions to guide others the way their elders had guided them and to be remembered as someone who made a difference in their community. Adrian reflected on how he thought of this role:

I've just learned that elder is not, you know, my definition of elder is somebody who, who, who's giving back, who went through some things and are giving back. In my eyes your age doesn't necessarily make you an elder. You know, um, you know, I know people that's 60 years that I don't consider elder just because of he's, he's not instilling the values that I think that a person should be instilling in a young person. (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012)

Adrian highlighted the importance of instilling values in young people, something each young adult in this study said was at the core of their relationships with their elders and that shaped their agency for change. The young adults said that their values—or, as these Findings chapters term, commitments in action—shaped the way they navigated their lives and grounded them in a broader African American identity and counternarrative.

Discussion

In this chapter, the young adults share their experiences of navigating spaces where they encountered difference. Their stories illustrate the situational and contingent nature of transformative agency (Bajaj, 2009). For example, Michelle was jarred by her experience in a private postsecondary institution consisting mainly of white, middle-class students and felt the learning did not apply to her life. Frustrated that their aspirations for college seemed to slip out-of-reach, Adam and Lance both struggled to carve out a new

path. Julie recalled questioning her skills and abilities in an organization that did not share her approach to serving youth.

In each example of wavering and doubt, the young men and women described ways their Youth Space relationships and the opportunity structures they were exposed to supported them. After processing her college experience with her peers and gaining a new awareness of her cultural and racial identity, Michelle sought an institution that she felt was a better fit. Adam, Lance, and Julie gradually recovered their sense of agency by reconnecting with Ed, Paula, and others to leverage their skills and experience in serving the city's youth. For Adam and Lance, the deeper they got into their professional lives, the more they aspired to attain their degrees, but found that "once you're on the outside looking in, it's hard to navigate and to have those connections on the inside that's gonna get you back in" (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012). Julie chose a major in youth studies and simultaneously leveraged her skills and experiences in the rich professional network. Cyreta tapped into the network midway through college, and it facilitated her career development and exposed her to the rich ideas and counternarrative that her peers had experienced as youth.

The findings in this chapter suggest the importance of the young adults' belongings, with one another, in a cultural and historical narrative that values struggle and honors humanity, and in a web of organizations striving for social justice and youth engagement (Chávez & Griffin, 2009; Ginwright, 2007; O'Connor, 1997). Connecting to the ideas, relationships, and experiences with members of their accountability community—the "like-minded people, who respect you and also respect the things that

you care for and are about” (Julie, personal communication, June 1, 2013) played a role in overcoming roadblocks. The young adults are claiming the counternarrative and writing their own unique contributions to it. Each co-author interprets this cultural and historical narrative, incorporates the commitments in action, and enacts his or her sense of agency for change in distinct ways that reflect unique personalities and life experiences. Having found “a place to hang [their] story” in the counternarrative, the young adults engage in a dynamic, ongoing process of “finding [their] own story” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014) as they navigate the opportunity structures before them and carry out their human “projects” (Ortner, 1982) in unique ways.

Altogether, in preparing for and entering college, the young adults experienced a disjuncture between the non-dominant cultural capital and “critical social capital” (Ginwright, 2007, p. 404) they have accumulated and the dominant cultural capital that is valued in the predominantly white institutions they attended (Carter, 2003; Giroux, 1996). Navigating college also requires a new set of social capital that is, for most of the young adults, incongruent with the capital they garnered in their neighborhood and in the youth development network. An illustration of this lack of congruency is the fact that most of the young adults (5 of 6) talked about getting a degree in instrumental terms—as a credential required for them to earn a livable wage and/or to effect change at the level they desired. Whereas the group tended to connect their stories to the counternarrative and their identities as change-agents, most did not draw these connections to their college experiences. Instead, in response to learning experiences that seemed arbitrary or disconnected from their sense of agency and purpose, they drew on their relationships

with one another and their shared commitments to reframe their learning in light of the counternarrative and to ground them in the shared vision. For Julie and Cyreta, working in youth development while pursuing a corresponding degree created a greater sense of congruency, even though both women said they learned more from their elders. Cyreta reflected,

I'm in these classes and [you know] I'm learning all this stuff...I was [like] duh, like of course you don't talk to the young person like that [like], and it's cause I learned it from looking at [Ed, Aaron, and Amy] and how they treated us. And I personally feel like I [like] [the University] should just give me my degree [laughs]. (Cyreta, personal communication, March 2, 2012)

Adam, Adrian, and Lance aim to pursue college but, in the meantime, have found meaningful work in youth development. They all described various skills they are developing through their current work, including communication and public speaking skills and planning ahead. Adam, who held hopes for college as an important racial identity development experience, pursued this interest with his peers and mentors and became more “self-aware” in the process (Adam, personal communication, March 8, 2012). Overall, the young adults stories and experiences illustrate their strong identification with the counternarrative and “sense of common struggle” (Ginwright, 2005, p. 412). This chapter illustrates how they continue to hold fast to those ideas as they navigate spaces that diminish or challenge their cultural capital (Carter, 2003; Giroux, 1999).

Chapter Nine: Conclusion and Discussion

This study explored the influences that contributed to six young adults' sense of agency for social change. The study was framed in terms of transformative agency, which highlights the importance of an intention informing one's actions (Giroux, 1996; Noguera & Canella, 2006), and coalitional agency, which incorporates history, culture, and belonging into agency (Chávez & Griffin, 2009). The research was conducted between February 2012 and August 2014. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What influences (ideas, experiences, and relationships) made these young adults believe they should and could effect change in their communities?
2. How do they draw on these influences (ideas, experiences, and relationships) as they navigate young adulthood?

The influences that made these young adults believe they should and could effect change in their communities included 1) seeing themselves as co-authors and contributors to a courageous African American counternarrative; 2) embracing commitments to honor others' humanity, to serve others, and to struggle for justice; 3) having relationships with elders and peers that were trusting, that affirmed the young adults' identities and contributions, and that supported them in taking action in their neighborhood; and 4) enacting their sense of agency in their neighborhood. The young adults drew on these influences as they navigated numerous spheres of young adulthood.

The next section of this chapter uses a metaphor to synthesize the study findings, followed by a discussion of the study's contributions to youth development scholarship

and practice as well as its implications for policy and practice. The final section explores possibilities for future research.

The Tree of Coalitional Agency

A tree offers an ideal metaphor to illustrate the study findings. Learning about an empowering African American counternarrative began a rich process of identity development for many of the young adults—cultivating roots to nourish their commitments in action and sense of agency for change. The tree trunk was the “accountability community” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014) of Youth Space elders and the youth themselves. These supportive relationships created a safe, shared space of learning, processing, and embracing the counternarrative. Critical consciousness grew through the roots and the tree trunk, as the counternarrative highlighted historical injustices and group norms helped youth recognize and act upon systems and structures that constrained their lives. For several participants, embracing the counternarrative fostered moral commitments to honor others’ humanity and to accept one’s responsibility to serve others and contribute to a generational struggle for justice. These commitments and relationships drew on the roots to feed a sense of agency for social change, which was enacted in various branches—experiences taking action in their neighborhood, encountering challenges and disappointments in their lives, and navigating young adulthood. The nutrients that circulated through the roots, up the trunk and into the branches and leaves, constituted a complex sense of coalitional agency—that is, the young adults’ belonging to a cultural and historical counternarrative, one another, and their affiliations within a professional network that enabled them to enact their sense of

agency and live out their commitments in action. Altogether, the findings demonstrate that these young men's and women's sense of agency for change was coalitional more so than individual transformative agency. Subsequent subsections illustrate the role of coalitional agency within each part of the metaphorical tree.

Coalitional Agency in the Roots and Trunk

The young men and women pointed to their belonging to one another, their elders, and a historical and cultural narrative as providing a metaphorical "homebase," where they could process and learn from failures and successes, reaffirm their moral commitments, and develop their identities as change-agents and as co-authors of that narrative (Ginwright, 2007). For example, Adam found a "place to hang [his] story" (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014) as he related to Assata Shakur's story. With Aaron's mentorship, Adam further explored his racial identity and deepened his interest in African American history. Adrian described how his a Freedom School experience "gave [him] grounds for, like, who [he is] as a person, like, as an African American, as a race, and gave [him] another sense of humanity" (Adrian, personal communication, May 19, 2013). In articulating the commitments in action, the young adults described how elders facilitated discussions about "root issues" that fostered critical consciousness and helped them practice their moral commitments (Ginwright, 2007; Youniss & Yates, 1999). Their elders also exposed the youth to other people whose "lens" framed being a neighbor or community member as a responsibility and a means of effecting meaningful change (Youniss & Yates, 1999; O'Connor, 1997). Lance felt driven to step in to address conflict in his neighborhood because "there was somebody who told [him] the same

thing” (Lance, personal communication, March 8, 2012). Each of these examples from the previous chapters illustrates the way the young adults’ drew on their belongings as they articulated their identities as change agents. The young adults said they came to believe they should and could effect change in the world through their “belongings” with others (Carillo Rowe, 2008; Chávez & Griffin, 2009).

Coalitional Agency in the Branches

The branches were the various ways that the young adults lived out their commitments and enacted their sense of agency for change in their neighborhood and in their professional and personal lives. Adam emphasized the way he and his peers “stepp[ed] outside that comfort zone” in doing soapbox speeches and how that experience brought the group closer. Julie recalled that summer having long-term consequences for her identity, saying, “we were just social-justice people, like, for the rest of our lives.” These experiences contributed to their coalitions, sense of belonging with one another, and fostered their moral development (Chávez & Griffin, 2009; Youniss & Yates, 1999).

The young adults made it clear that their coalitional agency continues to feed and sustain their beliefs about their capacities to effect change. Adam sees himself as a mentor to the youth he works with. Drawing on his own racial-identity development under Aaron’s mentorship, Adam envisions passing on that learning by “helping other people realize where they are” (Adam, personal communication, May 9, 2012). Julie’s confidence about doing youth work “the way it should be done” is grounded in her Youth Space experience. In describing his priorities as a father and as a community member,

Adrian referenced his elders' examples and spoke at length about living out his moral commitments and teaching them to others.

Contributions to Scholarship and Practice

The study extends our understanding of agency for social change by shedding light on the coalitions, affiliations, and belongings that inform the young adults' sense of agency for social change (Chávez & Griffin, 2009). In her research on transformative agency, Bajaj (2009) acknowledged its situational and contingent nature. In the present study, the young adults' stories about challenges they faced and how they drew on their various belongings and affiliations to recover or receive guidance certainly affirms Bajaj's (2009) observations. This study extends our knowledge of transformative agency by surfacing deeper connections—to one another, to shared moral commitments, to a cultural identity, to a counternarrative of struggle, and/or to a sense of purpose—that sustained or revived several of the young adults' beliefs that they should and could effect change in their communities. These findings illuminate the potential role of coalitional agency in bolstering and reinforcing agency for social change. Furthermore, the present study begins to empirically flesh out the concept of coalitional agency that Chávez and Griffin (2009) put forth by identifying and describing various belongings that influenced the young adults' sense of agency for social change.

As previously discussed, the study shifted in response to the young adults' emphasis on the roots or grounding in the African American counternarrative and commitments in action. The young adults said these roots fed their change-agent identities in young adulthood as they navigated new professional, academic, and personal

terrain and pursued their long-term visions to be community elders. These rich findings extend Yates and Youniss's (1996) framework for identity development that weaves together agency, "social relatedness," and "moral-political awareness." In later work, Youniss and Yates (1999) flesh out the framework as they interpret their empirical research:

...everyday morality evolves from habitual action into a defined identity. . . . the formation of habit emerges through [community] service during the formative period of youth. Because service allows youth to practice moral behavior, they have the opportunity to experience themselves as effective moral actors. . . . [s]eeing that they can actually help. . . and then possibly projecting themselves as having skills and responsibility for addressing social ills, youth have taken a large step toward incorporating morality into their identities. (p. 372)

The present study's rich illustration of the relationships and experiences that fostered the young adults' sense of agency for change and helped them embrace the commitments in action extend and deepen Youniss and Yates' (1999) interpretations about these abstract concepts while providing concrete guidance to youth-development practitioners. Coalitional agency, which is grounded in the counternarrative and weaves the moral commitments into the young adults' experiences, relationships, and actions, enables the present study's findings to address a level of depth beyond Youniss and Yates' (1999) conceptions of moral-political awareness and social-relatedness.

The present research also captures the nuance of relationships with trusted elders as fertile ground in which the young adults' cultural identities, espousal of commitments "toward the common good" (Giroux, 1996), and sense of agency for change were fostered. There is a wealth of research on the importance of such relationships as developmental assets that help youth thrive (Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Drake & Blyth, 1998; Scales, Benson, Leffert, and Blyth, 2000). However, quite often, relationships with trusted adults are viewed among numerous other assets and supports. Such research lends little insight into the nature of the relationships themselves and the specific ways in which youth experience them over time and across contexts. As the young adults in this study described their experiences of their influential relationships, they articulated the importance of being accepted and supported across several spheres of their lives. They reflected on learning gleaned in their relationships, notably how they incorporated ideas, commitments, and practices into their worldview and ways of engaging with others. Altogether, the findings articulate a deeper, more unconditional, and cross-contextual type of relationship that is rarely captured in the youth-development literature.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Returning to the tree metaphor described above elucidates the study's implications for policy and practice. In responding to the researcher's questions that focused on branches—experiences of enacting their sense of agency—the young adults consistently pointed toward the trunk and roots—their belongings in a courageous African American counternarrative and their commitments in action, both of which they

learned about and embraced through their relationships with elders and within their “accountability community” (Ed, personal communication, January 29, 2014). The findings suggest that having a safe space and collaborative, trusting relationships underpinned the more visible outcomes.

Building holistic relationships with youth and connecting their experiences in youth programs to a deeper sense of community history, cultural identity, and sense of purpose is a promising approach for youth-development practitioners. These priorities incorporate the key developmental tasks that take place during adolescence (specifically, the integration of peer group identity in one’s self-concept, which is of particular consequence for racial-identity development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Tatum, 1997) and leverage them toward fostering belonging, coalitional agency, and moral development (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss & Yates, 1999).

In this study, the moral commitments to honor humanity and serve others aligned the young adults’ daily actions with the counternarrative and shaped what could be considered a sense of purpose—“an organizing principle . . . a coherent vision of their future that connects in meaningful ways to their present life” (Koshy & Mennon Mariano, 2011, p. 13). Both important sources of motivation, agency for social change and purpose share a “beyond-the-self” quality” (Koshy & Mennon Mariano, 2011, p. 14) and focus on “the common good” (Giroux, 1996). Keeping sight of purpose as an “organizing principle” and helping youth draw connections between this broader vision and their choices and actions lays the groundwork for fostering a sense of purpose. Youth-development practitioners and policy-makers should be explicit about leveraging trusting

relationships to help youth identify and explore sense of purpose through experiences within and beyond youth programs.

Hervé Varenne encouraged researchers to look outside formal institutions to learn about how people educate themselves. His words offer insights into relationships as sites of learning: “Above all, people educate themselves with people who have little, if any direct authority over them, and who have no specialized expertise either on curriculum or pedagogy” (2009, p. 15). The relationships among peers and elders in this study spanned multiple contexts, were rooted in a counternarrative, and shared commitments and experiences. As the young adults’ reflections in Chapter 6 illustrated, the elders did not exercise authority over the youth. Instead, they casually offered up opportunities to lead, asked youth what they wanted to do, and invited them into ongoing processes and activities. Furthermore, while Ed, Aaron, and Amy were intentional about their work with the youth and drew on youth-development resources, they were not trying to “deliver” a certain curriculum or program. Youth-development practitioners and funders who establish policies, priorities, and accountability measures for their initiatives should be aware that best practices and efforts to measure outcomes can oversimplify complex processes. Focusing on the interventions that are most measurable (especially in the short term) can result in a relatively superficial focus on outcomes, rather than the deeper, more difficult-to-assess impacts that the present study suggests foster agency for social change rooted in identity and coalitions. Returning to the tree analogy, focusing on growing the branches can distract from fostering the roots that can lead to more robust, sustained commitments toward social justice.

Future Research

As the “Focusing on Roots Rather Than Branches” subsection in the Methodology chapter discussed, the young adults in this study pointed to fewer, deeper influences on their sense of agency for change, which were primarily ideas, relationships, and experiences that began at the Youth Space. While the present study offers a rich understanding of these powerful stimuli, a more comprehensive understanding of the elders’ approaches and practices that created the space and laid the groundwork for the youths’ experiences is needed. This sort of exploration was initiated in this project: during my conversation with Ed regarding the study’s emerging themes, he responded to the young adults’ stories by situating them in terms of his approach and vision for working with youth. Ed’s “parish concept” and his commitments to “not do programming” and “not claim these kids” uproot the most common structures and frames around youth-development practice. In his view, these structures got in the way of relating to and serving the youth themselves. A future study focusing on the concrete consequences of Ed’s approaches and commitments to youth is warranted. What did a model of following youths’ interests and needs look like in day-to-day practice? How did elders provide support structures that were responsive to youths’ changing interests and lives? A clearer understanding of how the Youth Space was run, how funding was garnered and used, and how partnerships were sought out and sustained would ground and support youth-development professionals and researchers seeking to emulate the approaches that Ed described and which the young adults pointed to as fostering trusting relationships and rich experiences. Overall, in “focus[ing] on what people do to educate

themselves outside the constraints constituting the problematics of schooling” (Varenne, 2008, p. 356), we may also need to look beyond the constraints presented by mainstream youth-development practices.

A related topic of future research would explore the opportunity structures in which several of the young adults found meaningful work that enabled them to live out their commitments in action. With which aspects of the various organizations’ missions, visions, frameworks, and cultures did the young adults identify? What shaped their real and perceived capacities to enact their sense of agency in some organizations and not in others? The young adults emphasized having the freedom to be creative in shaping their programs, solving problems, and being responsive in their relationships with youth. They valued organizations that had clear, youth-focused goals and whose methods and approaches seemed to align with those aims. They expressed little patience for organizations that claimed to serve youth but whose actions bent to bureaucratic processes, funder priorities, and rigid adherence to delivering curricular content. Julie’s reflection about recovering from a time of relative isolation and self-doubt in a community center by reconnecting with a professional network and doing youth work “the way [she] thinks it should be done (Julie, personal communication, March 20, 2012) is the clearest illustration of this theme. Several young adults expressed a sense that, in order to live out their commitments and do youth work the way they had experienced it, they would have to be independent consultants who “come in, do [their] thing, and get out” (Lance, personal communication, July 26, 2014), even though the model meant inconsistent work and income and limited benefits. A more thorough examination of

what makes for a good professional “fit” for these social change-makers could offer rich ideas for organizations seeking to serve youth and communities and foster agency for social change.

Conclusion

The themes and findings in this study were gleaned from stories and conversations about the young adults’ ongoing pursuits and struggles as well as their reflections on past experiences that shaped them. I have chosen to close the dissertation by returning to two quotes that crystalize coalitional agency in the study. The ideas were shared by Adrian and Julie, two of the young adults who most readily zoom out in their thinking to the broadest ideas and then zoom back in on the implications for their lives (for Adrian, ideas related to faith and philosophy and, for Julie, those often related to and learning from others’ stories and examples).

For Adrian, raising his children with strong values and faith is a primary means of contributing and enacting his sense of agency. In talking about his aim to raise his son with the same values that Ed and Aaron taught him, Adrian defined what he meant by elder:

I’ve just learned that elder is not, you know, my definition of elder is somebody who, who, who’s giving back, who went through some things and are giving back. In my eyes your age doesn’t necessarily make you an elder. You know, um, you know, I know people that’s 60 years that I don’t consider elder just because of he’s, he’s not instilling the values that I

think that a person should be instilling in a young person. (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012)

Julie described experiencing a shift in her thinking about serving others and struggling for justice. Whereas she once viewed “helping” as a choice and something that made her feel like a “superhero,” her “community” of local leaders and elders framed serving others as a responsibility:

But what the community made very clear to me was that I’m no more of a hero than anyone else that’s suffering from this or that’s dealing with these problems just because I’m willing to help. That just means that there needs to be more people that feel responsible, not feel. . . . I don’t even know what other word to describe that, but there should be more people that feel obligated to do this. (Julie, personal communication, April 18, 2012)

Julie seeks to embolden “more people” who recognize serving others is a responsibility. In both of these excerpts, the young adults draw meaning from their relationships and affiliations around them. They demonstrate their embeddedness in a rich context of social and cultural capital that they have incorporated into their identities as change-agents. They grasp on to the examples around them, to their elders, and to their cultural and geographical community as they prepare to contribute to the counternarrative.

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Appendix A

Study Summary Sheet

What do we want to learn by doing this project?

How do young people come to see themselves as able to take action and make a difference related to issues that matter to them? This project embraces your journey in becoming an active leader and change-maker over the years. It focuses on important experiences and “ah-hah moments” that you’ve had over the years and the ways relationships with others and connections with programs/organizations shape your journey.

How do we study this?

There are lots of ways to understand how young change-makers draw on relationships and networks to develop personally and have an impact in their community. I’ll describe what I’ve been thinking, and I’d appreciate your ideas on how this might be done differently.

First, I’d like to have 1–2 conversations with you individually about the way you think about your role in taking action for change. I’ll also ask you about some significant experiences in your journey that shaped you and made you want to get involved in issues.

Next, I would like to dig a bit deeper by talking to people you mentioned in your stories or observing you doing the activities you told me about. I’m going to try to learn as much as I can about the kinds of relationships and approaches to issues that shape your journey.

Throughout this time, I will be mapping your networks and writing up descriptions of what seems to be the “so what?” elements that have been important to you. Toward the end of the project, I’d like to talk with you individually to see if I’m on the right track. Finally, I’d like to have a big group gathering for you all to give me feedback on a mapping and some descriptions of what I’ve heard.

What is the time commitment and time line?

If you agree to participate in this project, I’d like to...

- ...have 3 one-hour conversations with you (Feb–May 2012).
- ...follow-up on your stories by talking with people you mentioned, learning about projects you worked on, and observing you doing your work (i.e., joining a meeting or event you described as an important part of your work)
- ...gather the group for a larger meeting in August or September 2012.
- ...when possible, have brief phone chats with you during these months if I need clarification on something you’ve told me.

How might we use what we learn from the project?

This project not only tells the story of your unique group, but it can also tell us how to support youth in figuring out and acting on issues they care about. By looking at what happens *within and beyond* youth and community programs, we can learn not only *what* activities or relationships make a difference, but *how* and *why* they are helpful. This is important for continuing and improving the work we do

with youth and communities. It could help numerous youth workers and organizations we care about, can help us think about and argue for the affinity space idea that Ed's been sharing with us, and it's also information that program funders need to hear (but often don't because these stories can't be captured in a 2-year report). I am completely open to your ideas on how to share and use this information in the short and long-term.

Appendix B.1: Consent Information Sheet

Learning from Youth Social-Change Agents

You are invited to be in a research study of how young people use relationships and experiences in and beyond youth programs to become active change-makers in their communities. You were selected as a possible participant because you have been involved in a youth program and are actively involved in your community. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Beth Dierker, a graduate student at the University of Minnesota in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to understand how relationships and networks of African American youth who participate in youth programs contribute to their desire and ability to become involved in broader community work on issues they care about.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a total of 3 one-on-one interviews of 60–90 minutes each and one final group interview of 60–90 minutes between February and November 2012. I would like to record these interviews so I can review the information later, but all of the information you provide will be kept confidential.

2. Share with me names and contact information of 1–2 key people you identify as influential in your personal journey to becoming a change-maker, and I will then interview these people.

3. Allow me to observe you in the activities or work you identify as being important to your personal journey to becoming or acting as a change-maker. I will quietly observe and take written notes.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

This study has no known risks.

The benefits to participation are that (1) at the end of the study, you will have a detailed write-up of your story and of the group's story in becoming active change-makers. Several of the potential participants for this study have expressed a desire to share their stories with others; and (2) you can use the information learned from this study to complement your professional work in youth development and community change efforts.

Compensation

You will receive a \$20 Cub Foods grocery gift card immediately after each of the three individual interviews and after the group interview.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you as a participant. Research records will be stored securely, and only I, as the primary researcher, will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to

current university policy for protection of confidentiality. I will have access to the digital recordings of interview conversations, and I will only share them with one other person who will type them for me but who will understand that the information shared is confidential. Digital recordings will not be used for any other purposes and will be erased five years after I have finished writing about the study. I may also share what you've told me with my faculty advisor, but I will remove names and other identifying information.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the community organizations in which you've been involved or with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Beth Dierker. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [home address and phone number omitted], dierk020@umn.edu. Also feel free to contact the faculty advisor overseeing Beth's work on this project: Joan DeJaeghere, 612-626-8258, deja0003@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher or her advisor, **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455, (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Date: January 23, 2013

Appendix B.2: Revised Consent Information Sheet

Learning from Youth Social-Change Agents

You are invited to be in a research study of how young people use relationships and experiences in and beyond youth programs to become active change-makers in their communities. You were selected as a possible participant because you have been involved in a youth program and are actively involved in your community. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Beth Dierker, a graduate student at the University of Minnesota in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to understand how relationships and experiences of African American youth who participate in youth programs contribute to their desire and ability to become involved in broader community work on issues they care about.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in 1 or 2 one-on-one interviews of 60–90 minutes each (completed in spring 2012). Participate in 2 to 3 large group meetings about 1.5 hours to 2 hours in length during the summer and fall of 2013. I would like to record these interviews so I can review the information later, but all of the information you provide will be kept confidential.

2. Share with me names and contact information of 1–2 key people you identify as influential in your personal journey to becoming a change-maker, and I will then interview these people.

3. Allow me to observe you in the activities or work you identify as being important to your personal journey to becoming or acting as a change-maker. I will quietly observe and take written notes.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

This study has no known risks.

The benefits to participation are that

- (1) you can engage with one another and with key elders/significant adults in your lives to purposefully reflect upon key learning and experiences in your journey.
- (2) at the end of the study, you will have a detailed write-up of many aspects of your story and of the group's story in becoming active change-makers. Several of the potential participants for this study have expressed a desire to share their stories with others, and
- (3) you can use the information learned from this study to complement your professional work in youth development and community change efforts.

Compensation

You will receive a \$20 Cub Foods grocery gift card immediately after the individual interviews and after the group interview.

Confidentiality: **Please read updated version**

In any sort of report I might publish or, in describing the study to others, I can change your name so that it will be more difficult to identify you. However, given your wide-ranging involvement in the community and the detailed nature of this study, it may still be possible for some readers to figure out who you are.

Please indicate your preference on being identified by your name or having a different name below:

YES, feel free to use my name.

NO, please do not use my name (your name will be changed).

Print your real name here

Name (first name only) you would like used in the study

Comments

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only I, as the primary researcher, will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current university policy for protection of confidentiality. I

will have access to the digital recordings of interview conversations, and I will only share them with one other person who will type them for me but who will understand that the information shared is confidential. Digital recordings will not be used for any other purposes and will be erased five years after I have finished writing about the study. I may also share what you've told me with my faculty advisor, but I will remove names and other identifying information.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the community organizations in which you've been involved or with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Beth Dierker. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [home address and phone number omitted], dierk020@umn.edu. Also feel free to contact the faculty advisor overseeing Beth's work on this project: Joan DeJaeghere, 612-626-8258, deja0003@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher or her advisor, **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455, (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Date: May 11, 2013

Appendix C.1: Individual Interview 1 Protocol

Thanks so much for your willingness to meet with me today. As I've said, I'm doing this project for my degree and out of personal interest. The goal is to understand a little bit more about how you have come to be so active in youth and community issues around the metropolitan area. Of course, you're a young adult now, but my understanding is that you've been involved in community organizing and youth programming since you were a youth yourself.

In our conversation today, I want to talk about how you see yourself personally and professionally and the extent to which you feel like you can contribute to improving your community or changing things that you see as unfair. I also want to hear about the helpful aspects and the barriers to making that happen.

- I've noticed you working on all these initiatives like [insert organizations, projects] and wondered what about the work keeps you engaged and involved?
 - What do you do or what do you get out of it that drives you?
- Can you tell me about some of the things you're doing now?
- How did you come to be involved with each of these organizations and groups?
 - What matters to you most that made you want to get involved in [insert organization or group mentioned in response above]?
 - For example, is it about the topic of the work being done, the people involved, the things you'd be doing, etc.?
- Can you tell me the story of how you first got involved with youth and community organizations?

- Was there some specific point or a situation when you first got the sense that you wanted to and could make a difference in something that mattered to you?
- What programs or activities drew you in? How old were you then?
- What happened next?
- In doing this type of work like [draw on categories of work from prior questions, i.e., working with groups in the community, leading youth programs]...
 - When have you surprised yourself by stepping up or taking something on?
 - When have you felt overwhelmed and intimidated?
 - How do you deal with that?
- In what ways are you able to or not able to make social change?
 - What does that mean to you?
 - What about you and what you do makes you feel like you can do something to make a difference?
- What are some of the struggles or challenges that make doing all of this difficult? This can be from when you first got involved [with organization x] up to today.
 - And what helped you deal with these struggles?
 - What kept you connected to the people and the work?
- Is there anything else you'd like to say about anything I've asked you?

Next time (in about 2 weeks), I will be asking about specific moments or experiences you had when you really felt like you were or could be a change agent—somebody who can take action to really make a difference.

- These can be in the distant past or related to work that's ongoing right now. For example, you may have just been doing something you enjoy or maybe you had a profound learning moment or a really humbling, hard realization that you were dealing with.

I know it's sometimes hard to think of these things off-hand, so I'd encourage you to think about some of those moments or experiences and make some notes that might help you remember when we meet next.

- Does the question make sense to you?
- Do you have any questions for me about this interview, the next one, or the project in general?

[If possible, schedule next interview.]

Appendix C.2: Individual Interview 2 Protocol

It's great to see you again. Last time when we talked you really shared some interesting stories and details about how you got involved the great work you're doing, how it makes you feel and think about yourself, and what are some of the factors that help or hinder your continued involvement over the years.

Today, I want to get to specific moments and things that happened when you really felt like you were or could be a change agent—somebody who can take action to really make a difference. These can be in the distant past or related to work that's ongoing right now.

1. Think of a time when you really felt like you were affecting or changing systems, people or ideas to improve the way things are.
 - a. Examples: You may have just been doing something you enjoy or maybe you had a profound learning moment or a really humbling, hard realization that you were dealing with.
2. When did this incident happen?
3. What circumstances led up to the situation?
4. Who else was involved?
5. What did others say or do in the interaction?
6. What happened that made you feel really capable of making a difference?
 - a. Did this moment lead to some actual action or did it shape the way you think about things?

Repeat questions several times to elicit about 3–5 critical incidents, at least one of which is current/ongoing.

Appendix D: Project Recap

Goal: To tell the story of how these young adults came to believe they *could and should* shape their community and how this has shaped them as young adults.

Key questions

- What ideas, experiences, and relationships made them believe they could and should make a difference? (This might include whatever you point to as important such as family, faith, experiences in and out of school, etc.)
- How do they mobilize these ideas, experiences, and relationships as they make choices and pursue goals in their lives?

Timeline

May, June	- Beth do check-ins with young adults re: big ideas from interviews so far; guidance/key questions they have for large group meeting
June, July	- Beth meet with key elders or mentors Ed, Amy, Aaron, and Paula to share learning so far and get insights on <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. key strategies they used 2. reflections on their practice and/or relationships with youth and 3. questions they would like to pose in the large group meeting <p>- gather materials/info from key events, PSAs, and young adults' resumes and/or personal essays they've used for other purposes (if willing to share)</p>
Late August	- large-group meeting with all young adults and key elders/mentors to discuss key learnings and answer one another's questions (see 2 nd page)
Fall	-Beth writing lots and lots and checking in individually (whatever method you prefer) to clarify ideas and assure I've represented your ideas well <p>- as a group (maybe another meeting for those interested) to discuss and begin work on other ways we can share this information - i.e., workshops, summaries, etc.</p>
Spring 2014	- Beth finalizing dissertation and meeting requirements for degree with goal of graduating in May!!! - Beth committed to working with you all to distribute/share project learning in various ways

Why the project is important

1. Illustrates important youth development practices and other influences that help youth stay on a “positive track” and believe they can make a difference—helpful information for youth, youth workers, organizations, teachers and schools, policy makers, and funders.

2. Understanding your learning and the connections you made from and beyond the Youth Space (the ripple effect) is really important and strengthens the argument for youth involvement in positive ways (in programs and community more broadly)

3. This project helps Beth complete her PhD so she can go on to work with organizations that work with youth and try to help them do their work in youth-centered ways.

4. This project offers an opportunity for you all to reflect on your journeys and have a large group conversation with key elders/mentors. **The conversation reviews key learning Beth has gleaned from talking with you, but will be based mainly on what you've expressed a desire to learn more about such as:**

a) Elders have asked: What brought you in the door and kept you coming to the Youth Space? What could we have done better? What did we do well?

b) Young adults have asked: Why did you choose to work with youth for your job when you had other opportunities? Why did you pour so much of your energies into me? What did you see in me? Our backgrounds are so different but I aspire to follow in your footsteps. . . . What do I need to learn about your choices, mistakes, and views to walk a similar path?

***Either in person, or via text/phone/email, PLEASE LET ME KNOW if there are other interests you would like to pursue through this project.

I hear a lot of you pondering big questions during this dynamic phase of your lives. Use this project to dive into the group's collective wisdom***

Appendix E: Member-Check Themes

Nature of Relationships: (this captures the grouping of subthemes within/across macro themes)

Relationships were like a family

- learning from, admiring, respecting each other
- Youth Space a safe space to be yourself and develop your skills
- challenging one another/debate, have to explain your ideas, OK to mess up
- adults not pushing opinions on you—offer a thought & move on—“golden nugget”

“He [Ed] dealt with us in our entirety” —family, personal, school, jobs, finances, goals.
Ongoing—he is and was an advocate.

- The “really care” about me
- Other key adults are being “here to serve” and support as needed
- Push you, give you constructive feedback, break things down, be direct, make you think harder about things

Input is valued and ownership was empowering

- Put in leadership role or given responsibility and trusted to do the job; knowing the support was there
- Given freedom and ownership in projects
- My input is valuable; being asked for my input drew me in and I got involved
- I have something to offer—my experience, perspective, skills, and strength

Nature of Experiences

Challenge: I did more than I thought I could do

- In large events and in small-scale events/programs
- Memories are inspiring, sometimes lead to future actions and decisions
- Being pushed by mentors and peers; sometimes adults would step back

I “stumbled” into some great opportunities

- Casual/spontaneous entrance into big and small opportunities
- Openness to trying new things, flexibility
- Payment and/or leadership opportunity was what initially drew me in, but then got deeper and more committed

Having leadership opportunities is really important

- being needed, doing work that makes a difference to somebody

Being exposed to peoples’ stories and community issues was eye-opening

- once you see it/know it, you can't ignore it
- I became a "social justice" person
- exposure to amazing people with inspiring stories (local and international)
- deep, emotional understanding of African American history
- understanding the ongoing struggle that has been going on for generations and seeing my role and responsibility in the struggle
- digging into the root causes of problems and seeing structures that oppress

In past experience and the way I see things now—youth are at the center

- how you know how a community is doing
- what I focus on in my work above other priorities/agendas
- I have a good idea of how youth work should be done

It was really important that we were "out" in community and connected to all kinds of activities

- Youth Space was like home base but always around doing things
- chances to explore and understand my role in community, my responsibility
- few boundaries of where I "belong"

Values (or what guides the journey): values mentioned often—often best understood in retrospect - never realized it then, but now see things differently—faith deeper

Respect and admiration for elders is a core value

- finding my role and responsibility in community; generational contribution
- envisioning myself as an elder – my legacy in community

Understanding common humanity is a core value

- related to being exposed to peoples' stories
- seeing issues through this lens vs. blaming people
- really respecting people and their experiences

Commitment and responsibility are core values

- recognizing how important I am to the people around me
- building relationships with youth
- I relate to/present to/am an example for/empathize with youth
- I am an example to others (especially youth); it matters what I do and how I treat people/that I follow through
- I have a responsibility to give back to my community

My faith grounds and ties into my core values

My faith is a reference point/guide in my decision-making

- thinking about **purpose**

Sometimes I'm motivated by frustration and have to push back

- push back against messages from outsiders about my community
- push back on society's messages and assumptions about things (especially youth)
- I want to change other peoples' opinions about things I care about

Being connected to some key mentors'/peoples' networks really helpful

Lots of opportunities to do work I care about

- Hearing about it from this person also means it's probably a good idea

It's so important to be humble and real with people

do things because they matter, not for recognition

Appendix F: Cover Sheet for Participants Reading Drafted Findings

THANK YOU for taking the time to read this paper! I am completely open to your feedback and critique. I am trying to accurately represent YOUR IDEAS and I need your guidance to do that job well (: Please review the notes below before you begin reading.

Sincerely and with much gratitude,

Beth

dierk020@umn.edu; [phone number omitted]

Background information on what this 80-page paper is

- This is a draft of one chapter of my doctoral dissertation, the final requirement for my degree.
- I am still working on a “context” chapter with background information (re: the community, the church, the Youth Space, and each of you). This is also where I include Ed’s reflections on his perspectives and approaches. I will share ASAP.
- Other chapters in the dissertation discuss a) why a project like this is important, b) how it was carried out, and c) why it matters to the world. I will share all of this with you if/when you are interested (:

Things to keep in mind as you provide feedback

- **It’s my writing, but they’re your ideas.** I see myself as a weaver, drawing on your stories and ideas and weaving them into a combined picture/tapestry that hangs together and makes sense.
- In integrating quotes, I drew on peoples’ words that expressed the ideas most clearly/directly. I wasn’t aiming for equal representation of each person in the story. I am happy to revisit which quotes I used.
- **Agency** = a belief that I can do something/make a difference. Because it’s an abstract idea, I didn’t use the word in my conversations with you, but I asked more concrete questions to draw out stories and examples related to agency.
- **Fake names for people, organizations, and places:** I realize I did a horrendous job of inventing fake names. Please suggest better ones. When it’s done, this paper will be accessible nationally and internationally. My adviser suggested I follow standard practice of changing names/location. For any uses of this paper/writing that you have in mind, we don’t have to continue this practice.

Questions to consider as you read

- **Accuracy:** Do I accurately interpret your ideas/quotes? Please let me know if I misinterpreted or misrepresented your ideas.

- **Connections:** Are the connections I make between big ideas and examples the way you see it, or did I create a connection when you hadn't seen it that way before?
- **Weight:** Are the things I wrote about as most important/central really that important to you? If you shared something as a side thought that wasn't so important to you but I blew it out of proportion, please let me know!