



Why Supporting Young People Requires a Different Way of Thinking about Culture

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In response to some of the most pressing problems facing youth, short-term programs aimed at transforming the attitudes and behaviors of young people have become common in the United States. Interpersonal violence prevention programs in particular — picture anti-bullying initiatives or healthy relationship education — have reached nearly two-thirds of U.S. high school students.

My research explores the unexpected cultural consequences of this slow-rolling policy revolution. Over three and a half years, I spent over 400 hours observing prevention programs across Los Angeles; and I conducted in-depth interviews with 54 youth participants and program facilitators. These programs are noteworthy in that, unlike other approaches to social problems, they set out to act on culture directly, without the typical policy tools of incentives and punishments. And yet, aside from evaluation studies, we know little about how their implementation takes shape in practice. My research examines what the outcomes of these programs look like in the daily lives of young people. The results suggest that the thinking behind these programs relies on a flattened notion of culture which misses the full cultural world of the young people it sets out to change and, in the process, generates flawed evidence that overstates its effectiveness.

The Programmatic Approach to Youth Problems

I use the term *change programs* to encompass a variety of programmatic approaches — including “positive youth development,” and “health promotion” — that share several defining characteristics. They are short-term, often just ten or twelve weeks at a time, aim to change young people in measurable ways, and operate through a tightly structured curriculum composed of easily reproducible units and exercises. More like marketing than typical social policy, change programs tell stories in order to redirect the behavior, attitudes, and norms of target populations in an attempt to induce groups and individuals to make specific behavioral choices.

Evaluations of change programs show evidence that they can simply and directly transform attitudes and behaviors in particular and culture broadly. This is accomplished through the use of measurement tools similar to those used in education: series of questions, spaced over the course of weeks or months: in short, tests. Participants may learn about rates of dating violence and effective interpersonal communication strategies and then answer a series of questions that ask them to reiterate how they feel about dating violence and how they would respond when confronted with a friend in an unhealthy relationship. However, I found that these methods were insufficient to assess the transformation of behaviors and attitudes in daily life. What individuals do is rarely as straightforward or rational as the way they talk about themselves in response to hypothetical scenarios.

By conducting fieldwork in the rooms where programs take place and through interviews with youth participants, I found that the tightly controlled messages of change programs often fell apart in the messy and profoundly unequal contexts of young people’s lives. Arguments for equality and fairness in interpersonal relationships were undermined by punitive authority enacted by school officials. Skits recounting friends talking through dating trouble sounded unrealistic when couched in the bland and decontextualized language of a well-tested curricula. In short, culture was far more complex, shifting, and local than a short-term curriculum could account for.

This is not to say that cultural change programs did nothing. On some occasions, they encouraged small, but significant behavioral shifts, which, in the long run, may improve outcomes. However, change programs centered a notion of culture that could be felt and measured in individual change, but had no way to make sense of the social and cultural contexts within which young people’s behaviors and attitudes take shape.

Towards a Deeper Approach to Culture

By treating multiple choice questions about attitudes as actual attitudes and short answers about behavior as behavior itself, change programs flatten culture. The notion of culture that underlies curricula and is counted in evaluations does not capture the depth of young people's stories and experiences. This shortcoming makes it difficult for young people to incorporate the lessons of the curricula into their daily lives, even while the data collected on the program show significant change. A deeper view of culture, one that is lived-in, flexible, creative, and couched in context, promises to enable more meaningful, sustained and youth-directed changes to attitudes and behaviors. This deeper notion of culture could be reflected in several changes to programs:

- Center young people's lived experience, not decontextualized one-size fits all examples.
- Create spaces in which young people are encouraged, without fear of surveillance or control, to craft their own cultural narratives.
- Draw on the tools of narrative analysis developed in qualitative sociology to develop evaluations that center a robust definition of culture.
- Carry out these initiatives by supporting adults who are already present in the cultural world of schools.

Read more in Max A. Greenberg, *Twelve Weeks to Change a Life: At-Risk Youth in a Fractured State* (University of California Press, forthcoming).